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The early development of Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy of history.

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THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF
REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S PHILOSOPHY
OF HISTORY

A Thesis Presented

By

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I

INTRODUCTION

1.

To many historians a philosophy of history is an object of inquiry rather than a useful system of thought. Today's social scientists do not pretend that knowledge concerning man can be systematized into a philosophy. The leap from the specific to the general is too great. The physiological psychologist — the epitome of the social scientist — shows great reluctance to generalize from his specific laboratory findings. Many historians, also imagining themselves to be social scientists, have conjured up a host of reasons to avoid generalization.

One victim of this trend has been the respectability of "philosophy of history," with the grandiose statements implied by "philosophy." A student of this subject has written that the "ordinary professional historian is usually a practicing positivist. If he has a philosophy of history, he feels uneasy about it, particularly in the presence of his colleagues."¹

At the same time that philosophies of history are denied, "meaning" in history — if considered at all — is concentrated upon particular events or time periods, rather than applied to the whole of history. However, as Hans Meyerhoff has pointed out,² there has been, in the last thirty or forty years,

¹E. Harris Harbison, Christianity and History (Princeton, 1964), p. 45.

²Hans Meyerhoff, ed., The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology (New York, 1959), pp. 21-24.

a renewal of interest among theologians in the "meaning" in (and of) history. This concern with meaning, in the sense that a philosophy of history is implied, has not generally been accepted by historians. Herbert Butterfield, in Christianity and History,³ stands as an exception. As a result of the failure among historians to concern themselves with the overall meaning and philosophical implications of their subject, the discussion of philosophy of history has been centered primarily among philosophers — who usually approach history from the presuppositions of philosophical idealism, or naturalism — and theologians.

2.

The theologians of the last forty years whose interest in history has resulted in significant contributions to the problem of meaning in history include Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Jacques Maritain, Anders Nygren, Friedrich Gogarten, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr.⁴ The philosopher-theologian Karl Löwith has also made a heavy contribution to this field.⁵

Of these writers, and many others, Reinhold Niebuhr has had the greatest impact in America. Niebuhr, whose first article appeared in 1916, has

³Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History (New York, 1949).

⁴For the background of this movement see E. Harris Harbison, Christianity and History, chapter two; and James M. Connolly, Human History and the Word of God: The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought (New York, 1965).

⁵Karl Löwith's most widely known work is Meaning in History (Chicago, 1949).

demonstrated over the past fifty years an intense interest in the meaning of history. His theology is unintelligible without a consideration of his philosophy of history; neither can his philosophy of history be intelligently discussed without an understanding of his theology. This is not an exceptional fact: the interest of theologians in history has prompted the use of the term "theology of history" in place of "philosophy of history." In spite of the differing terminology, the subject-matter remains the same. The difference is that theological rather than idealistic or naturalistic presuppositions are used in the formation of a philosophy of history.

We will not need to concern ourselves extensively with Niebuhr's theology, except as it relates to his philosophy of history. Nor shall we attempt a comprehensive examination of his philosophy of history. The former problem has been adequately treated by several scholars,⁶ and the latter is beyond the scope of this paper. The work that has previously been done on Niebuhr's philosophy of history has tended to view the subject as a whole; it is the purpose of this paper to show the development of Niebuhr's thinking on history up to the publication in 1937 of his first major book on philosophy of history, Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History.⁷ In Beyond Tragedy, many of the ideas which he had presented in more random fashion over the past fifteen years were brought together and systematically elaborated

⁶Two excellent studies are Hans Hofmann, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, trans. by Louise Pettibone Smith (New York, 1956), and Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York, 1960).

⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History (New York, 1937).

in fifteen "sermonic essays." Niebuhr delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in the spring and fall of 1939, and published them in two volumes as The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, in 1941 and 1943.⁸ The second volume, Human Destiny, is especially important as a systematic presentation of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. And the most comprehensive and systematic statement of Niebuhr's philosophy of history was published in 1949 as Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History.⁹ One further volume which is especially significant for Niebuhr's interpretation of history is The Self and the Dramas of History, published in 1955.

These important works, beginning with Beyond Tragedy, form the basis for most analyses of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. What does not seem to be equally understood is the fact that Niebuhr's philosophy of history did not suddenly emerge in Beyond Tragedy (or in Human Destiny) but was the product of over a dozen years of development. An analysis of Niebuhr's publications up to 1937 provides evidence for the hypothesis that the formation of the basic ideas in Niebuhr's vision of history took place well before their systematic presentation as a philosophy of history.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation (2 vols.; New York, 1941 and 1943). The edition cited in this paper is that of 1964, and the volumes will hereafter be referred to as Human Nature (vol. 1) and Human Destiny (vol. 2).

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views (New York, 1949). Cf. Nathan Scott, Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 38.

II

THE 1920'S (PART 1)

It becomes apparent, after some study, that what is essential in Niebuhr's writing is more convincingly put forth in his books than in his articles.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we do find occasional shorter pieces which express an argument in such a way that the less concentrated presentation in the longer works is illuminated. In addition to this initial importance of the articles, they are also valuable in some cases for showing a development of ideas in Niebuhr's philosophy of history.

1.

Between 1915 and 1928, Niebuhr served as pastor for a rapidly growing church in the automotive boom-town of Detroit. From Detroit he took a post at the Union Theological Seminary, where he has remained for the rest of his life.

It is easy to attribute to his early publications from Detroit a prescience of his later thought. We can trace the earlier, more amorphous thinking but we must guard against reading conclusions of the 1930's back into the tentative statements of the 1920's.

Though we are aware of this danger, there are several elements of the later thought which clearly emerge in certain of Niebuhr's early articles in

¹⁰Cf. Georgette Vignaux, La Théologie de l'Histoire chez Reinhold Niebuhr . (Paris, 1956), p. 7.

The Christian Century and The Atlantic Monthly. As early as 1922, for example, Niebuhr spoke of the "sin of modern society."¹¹ Though in this case he meant that the economic struggle was unfairly conducted, the fact that he applied the word "sin" to society as a whole anticipates his later emphasis upon original sin, and is indicative of the entire Neo-Orthodox movement in theology (in which Niebuhr was in the foreground) which stressed the sin of man.¹²

There are two further points in this early article, from 1922, which point to elements in Niebuhr's mature thought closely connected to his philosophy of history. The first is his reference to the "inevitability" of economic conflict.¹³ It is not the fact of economic conflict that is significant so much as the use of the word "inevitability." This word is generally employed by one who has accepted the existence of at least one absolute. A thorough-going relativist would hesitate to call any future event inevitable, because he would have presupposed no "given" by which he could judge the course of history. Throughout fifty years of writing, Niebuhr has had no compunctions about designating an event "inevitable." The fact that, in 1922, he saw "economic conflict" as inevitable (as did many people) should not permit us to forget that

¹¹"The Church and the Middle Class," The Christian Century, 39 (Dec. 7, 1922), 1514.

¹²Karl Barth, who initiated much of the thinking of Neo-Orthodoxy, published his seminal work, The Epistle to the Romans, in 1918. Though Niebuhr was among the first Americans to recognize this essentially European movement, there is no evidence to suggest his awareness before the middle or late 1920's.

¹³"The Church and the Middle Class," op. cit.

it is but a short step from interpreting a force in history as inevitable, to calling the course of history inevitable — as he was later to do.¹⁴

The second point, perhaps a semantic one, is Niebuhr's use in this article of the words "prophetic" and "prophet." He referred not only to his view of the economic situation as necessarily "prophetic," but also to his own role as that of a "prophet." Either we may dismiss these words as the hubris of a young minister, or we may read back into them the aura of his later philosophy of history. His later views certainly became prophetic — even apocalyptic — and he is often referred to as a "prophet." Whether or not this is significant, the point we may make is this: while the content of the later philosophy of history was not expressed in 1922, some of the words were — sin, conflict, inevitable, prophetic.

The youthfulness of this early article is also evident, for at one point Niebuhr spoke of finding "a way of abolishing the conflict."¹⁵ Though he had earlier spoken of the inevitability of conflict, Niebuhr, in 1922, was still sufficiently imbued with the Social Gospel and pragmatism to speak of abolishing conflict. This type of thinking on "conflict" was to disappear completely from his thought by the time of the Depression.

¹⁴Cf. Beyond Tragedy, pp. 30, 45; and Human Destiny, pp. 319-321.

¹⁵"The Church and the Middle Class," op. cit.

2.

In 1925, writing in The Atlantic Monthly, Niebuhr again expressed several of the ingredients of his later philosophy, though in a less incisively worded form.¹⁶ One especially significant statement was his plea for a "spiritual appreciation of human life."¹⁷ In this case he was speaking of a "social morality" with spiritual underpinnings, but he threw the force of this argument against "the hostility of nature." He then emphasized that the cruelty which man inflicted on his fellow men (owing to "their mutual fear and their greed") was greater than that "from the hostility of the natural world."¹⁸

If we tie these statements together we have an important part of Niebuhr's later philosophy of history. On the one hand he argued that man could not confront a hostile natural world without spiritual assistance. Man was not capable, as a finite creature, of resisting the temptation and hostility of the natural world. The reason that man himself was not simply a "finite" creature, but rather finite with the capacity to conceive the infinite, was not explained in 1925. But the presupposition that man is somehow in need of spiritual sustenance against the finite world does hint toward a later development of Niebuhr's thought. At this stage we can merely note that Niebuhr did not consign man to the world of nature, and thus his view of human history is one that must include elements other than the naturalistic.

¹⁶"Can Christianity Survive?" The Atlantic Monthly, 135 (January, 1925), 84-88.

¹⁷Ibid., 86.

¹⁸Ibid.

Closely related to this separation of man from nature, and the consequent need for supernatural balm, is the warning that man inflicts upon himself the most grievous of injuries. There is a definite suggestion that man's capacity for evil is at least as great as his capacity for good. In speaking of the operation of human institutions, Niebuhr noted that liberal views of man's nature fail "to understand how evil essentially good men can be."¹⁹ As in the case of man's confrontation with nature, spiritual help is the answer to the evil in man. When Niebuhr wrote that "nothing less than a transcendently oriented religion is equal to this task,"²⁰ he made reference to both the problem of man's finiteness within nature, and to the consequence of this finiteness between men — the existence of evil. An article later in the year made the same arguments concerning man's imperfection, and the need to alleviate this through the "grace of forgiveness," the strength for which "requires a high degree of spiritual passion and imagination."²¹

These arguments, as they relate to Niebuhr's philosophy of history, should not be made too strongly. Though the suggestions are there, they are not elaborated nor are they worded as incisively as they came to be over the next decade and one-half. In 1925 he wrote of man's sins against other men, but he did not develop this thought into a doctrine of "original sin." (In fact,

¹⁹Ibid.; 88.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹"Germany and Modern Civilization," The Atlantic Monthly 135 (June, 1925), 847.

Niebuhr's later doctrine of original sin involved man's relationship with God rather than man's relations with other men.²²) He did suggest that spiritual aid, in the form of the "grace of forgiveness," was needed in human relations. In a similar manner, man's confrontation with nature was in need of super-natural guidance.

The important elements in these early thoughts from 1925 are the evil of man, the finiteness of man, the inability of man to solve his problems by himself, and his resulting spiritual need. It will later become more obvious that Niebuhr's philosophy of history exhibits a distrust of man's reason, an acceptance of the reality and permanence of human evil (with the implied finiteness of man),²³ and the reality of God in history.²⁴

3.

In 1927 Niebuhr published his first book, Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life.²⁵ In it are contained many of the conclusions about religion and civilization that Niebuhr reached in the decade following the First World

²²Cf. Beyond Tragedy, pp. 27-30.

²³Donald B. Meyer has written that Niebuhr did not argue the doctrine of original sin until 1935, in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. (The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941 /Berkeley, 1960/,p. 244.) But a large amount of evidence is available to show that Niebuhr, in the 1920's, was intrigued with human evil.

²⁴These points, as expressed by 1934, are elaborated below in chapter V.

²⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life (New York, 1927).

War. He also elaborated for the first time some of his still tentative thoughts about man and history. Although he had not yet turned his theology toward a study of history and its meaning, he did make use of history to illuminate the problems of religion and civilization. In this sense, many of the statements in this book are a mirror-image of much of his later philosophy of history.

Throughout the book there is a complaint that religion had lost its significance for modern civilization.²⁶ Yet there is the equally pervasive argument that man is in need of religion:

Whatever may be said of specific religions and religious forms, it is difficult to imagine man without religion; for religion is the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world.²⁷

The argument in favor of religion was directed toward the needs of man and his civilization. Later Niebuhr was to extend — or perhaps synthesize — his concern for man and his culture into a consideration of human history. In much the same way that he saw religion as the "champion of personality" for man, and a bulwark against an "impersonal world," the insights of religion were to serve the same purposes for history. Religion was to give history its "personality," or its "meaning," and religion was to function as the final salvation at the end of history in the "impersonal world."²⁸

²⁶Cf. Does Civilization Need Religion?, pp. 3, 17, 220, 231-232.

²⁷Ibid., p. 4.

²⁸Cf. Beyond Tragedy, p. 302; and Human Destiny, pp. 287-288.

All of the argument in this early book was not, however, directed toward man. For the first time Niebuhr spoke of a "religious interpretation of the world." The relevance of religion to the sweep of history was supported by an argument that he was to continue to use in his theological view of history:

A religious ideal is always a little absurd because it insists on the truth of what ought to be true but is only partly true; it is however the ultimate wisdom because reality slowly approaches the ideals which are implicit in its life.²⁹

The religious interpretation of the world is essentially an insistence that the ideal is real and that the real can be understood only in the light of the ideal.³⁰

What Niebuhr was saying here, in 1927, and what was to become the essence of his later philosophy of history, is that the realities of history could be fully comprehended "only in the light of the ideal." The "ideal" was the absurdity, the irrationality of religion — the "ultimate wisdom."

The form of argument is that for which Niebuhr is well-known — and much criticized — paradox. The fact that an absurdity gives meaning whereas the force of reason remains helpless is a paradox. At this point there may be a tendency to dismiss Niebuhr's views on history as, if not sophistical, at least irrelevant. One student of Niebuhr's philosophy of history has argued that it would be more proper to speak of his "theology of history."³¹ The

²⁹Does Civilization Need Religion?, pp. 44-45.

³⁰Ibid., p. 46.

³¹Georgette Vignaux, La Théologie de l'Histoire chez Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 5, 27. Robert L. Calhoun saw fit to label the second volume of The Nature and Destiny of Man as "a theological interpretation of history." (The Journal of Religion, 24 /January, 1944/, 59.)

reason given for the inadequacy of the term "philosophy" of history is that philosophy presupposes rationality, and, according to Niebuhr, history cannot be fully comprehended in rational terms. Therefore, a "theology" of history is a more adequate description of a theory that relies on paradox and the supernatural.

The whole problem of philosophy versus theology is beyond the scope of this paper. Although it is true that a theology negates an insistence upon reason, philosophy may do the same. Even a philosophy which is based upon reason gives no guarantee that its presupposition — reason — is not itself an irrational posit. Without extending this line of argument, I will assume for our purposes the interchangeability of the terms philosophy and theology in relation to interpretations of history. For the sake of clarity, I will speak only of Niebuhr's "philosophy" of history, with the understanding that the presuppositions remain theological.

4.

The introduction of paradox into his argument is perhaps the most significant step taken in Does Civilization Need Religion?, but there are several other important ingredients to Niebuhr's philosophy of history in this book.

One reason for Niebuhr's use of paradox is that it allows a degree of movement between an insistence upon both the relativity of human decisions and the absolute ideal under which those decisions supposedly are made. In

1935 he was to speak of the "relevance of an impossible ethical ideal,"³² and in 1927 he used the same type of argument. In this case he insisted upon the difficulty of absolutizing religious ethics on account of the relativities of history; yet the temptation to dogmatize remained strong due to the feeling that we are in possession of an absolute set of ethics.³³ Turning this argument around, we see the manner in which Niebuhr was to attack those who absolutized their own vision of history from a naturalistic or a rationalistic basis.³⁴ These latter visions, by definition, remained within the "relativities of history" and were thus guilty of judging history from a point in time within history. Niebuhr posited his irrational absolute outside of history — in 1927 in connection with ethics — and could therefore speak of an interpretation of history that was not influenced by the relativities of history.

This point is clearly stated — in mirror-image — in the following passage:

The moral effectiveness of religion depends upon its ability to detach itself from the historical relativities with which its ideals are inevitability compounded in the course of history.³⁵

This sentence suggests Niebuhr's desire — in 1927 directed toward religion — that a vision of history not be immersed in the relativities of history, but rather stand above history with untarnished ideals. However unsatisfactory

³²An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York, 1935; Cleveland, 1956), chapter 4.

³³Does Civilization Need Religion?, pp. 221-222.

³⁴The most concentrated body of Niebuhr's criticism of "modern" philosophies of history is contained in Faith and History, chapters 2-5.

³⁵Does Civilization Need Religion?, p. 222.

this line of reasoning may be to a rationalist, it does have the advantage of pretending to hold knowledge with an authority beyond that of human ability. That Niebuhr calls such knowledge the "ultimate wisdom" is a logical step. That he should be accused of hiding behind paradox is also logical, but only if his initial presupposition of the limitations of human reason is not granted. In any case, the form of argument is indeed that of paradox.

The quotation given above, as applied to history, is not to be construed as a too liberal reading of Niebuhr's intent. In 1927 he was fully prepared to relate history (as well as ethics) with God:

Though God works his will against the inertia of the concrete world and the waywardness of man, neither science nor history justifies the conclusion that his resources are not ultimately equal to the creative task. The intractableness of the world makes the creative and redemptive struggle real but not hopeless.³⁶

The contention is explicit that God is a force in history. The argument is not made through positive empirical means, but rather through the negative reasoning that a supernatural force cannot be disproved. The counter-argument, that man is a force unto himself, is answered by Niebuhr with the accusation that it is pride alone that causes man to envision himself as unique in the "cosmic order."³⁷ It is this sort of pride that Niebuhr was later to identify as man's sin.³⁸ Pride colors man's ambitions with the desire for perfection and eternity within history.

³⁶Ibid., p. 218.

³⁷Ibid., p. 53.

³⁸Cf. Beyond Tragedy, pp. 27-30.

This important doctrine of original sin was given a clear statement in this early book:

If men disavow all faith in a power not their own
which makes for righteousness, they cannot finally
save themselves from either arrogance or despair.³⁹

Both the sin of pride, through arrogance, and the despair that comes from a too pessimistic view of human history could be alleviated (though not eliminated) by the acceptance of both "naive faith" and the reality of limitations upon man's "critical intelligence."⁴⁰ This argument is typical of Niebuhr's method of introducing two extremes — in this case optimism (arrogance) and pessimism (despair) -- and working toward a greater truth between the two. His philosophy of history later became the expression of man's ability to view the events within the relativities of history from a position beyond history.⁴¹ But since man himself is caught in history, he cannot absolutize his perceptions into laws. He can only have faith that his view of history does have meaning. This saves man from despair, and at the same time takes from him the arrogance which comes with knowledge based upon anything naturalistic. Man's knowledge of the meaning of history is based on a faith.

Niebuhr, in 1927, saw the choice as one "between the moral ennui of pessimism and the sentimentality of an unqualified optimism."⁴² The

³⁹Does Civilization Need Religion?, p. 52.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 123.

⁴¹See Beyond Tragedy, pp. 188-193.

⁴²Does Civilization Need Religion?, p. 194; cf. p. 209.

"sentimentality" that he suggested was the optimistic view of human nature, which seemed too absolute a doctrine to account for the varieties of human behavior. The important point, however, is the fact that he set up two sharply opposing polarities, and then merged them. In the process the issue became clouded — was man good or evil? Was he capable of discerning meaning in history? The result was a paradox; confusion was left by the elimination of absolutes capable of comprehension through man's "critical intelligence." But Niebuhr was insistent upon this destruction of clear-cut opposing forces:

An absolute dualism either between God and the universe
or between man and nature, or spirit and matter, or
good and evil, is neither possible or necessary.⁴³

While he deprecated man's ability to reason his way to an optimistic view of human nature, he did not therefore contend that the goodness of man was limited by the extent of man's "critical intelligence." Rather, he imagined there to be "undeveloped resources" of human love and creativity that could be tapped only by faith.⁴⁴

Two further semantic points about this book should be made. The first is that Niebuhr saw fit on several occasions to speak of the "tragedy of history."⁴⁵ In each case the meaning did not involve the apocalyptic sense that the "tragedy of history" was to later imply.⁴⁶ Yet the phrase — that was later to carry so

⁴³Ibid., p. 200.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 41-42; cf. p. 22.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 185, 208.

⁴⁶See Human Destiny, pp. 47-52.

much meaning — was used in 1927. The second point has to do again with Niebuhr's fascination with the idea of the "prophet." In defending the prophet against the priest, he wrote this:

There is no way of guaranteeing the reality of God
if someone does not make him real in experience,
and there is no way of declaring the victory of the
ideal if someone does not defeat reality in the name
of the ideal in history.⁴⁷

It is apparent that Niebuhr's prophet is someone who stands a step above the "relativities of history," yet, for the sake of countering the false reality with a true ideal, is also capable of stepping down into history. One might suggest that Niebuhr's prophet is a philosopher of history.

5.

The overall contribution of Does Civilization Need Religion? to Niebuhr's philosophy of history is impressive. Yet the arguments, though present, had not been consciously formulated as they may relate to history, nor was the language as decisive as it became in later works.

The most important factor introduced was the methodological one of paradox. This controversial device was to become the crux not only to Niebuhr's philosophy of history but also his theology. Another significant element is the question of human evil, and the optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of human nature. The evil inherent in man became one reason that man could not

⁴⁷ Does Civilization Need Religion?, pp. 216-217.

fulfill himself in history.⁴⁸ Man was incapable of creating his own destiny because his evil would continually corrupt the best efforts of his "critical intelligence." This is what makes the theory of human sin anti-rationalist, for it presupposes that man is unable to fulfill his own history, that he is unable to create a "heaven on earth," or a utopia. In an article in 1928 Niebuhr repeated this theme:

The war convinced me that religion can be effective only if it resists the embraces of civilization. The moral and religious ideal is in conflict with civilization as much as with nature. There is, indeed, no easy road to the millennium.⁴⁹

The language is of religion, but the same reasoning was also directed toward history.

In short, the introduction of human sin into a philosophical system slights human reason because it imposes a limit on reason's capacity. One thing that reason cannot do is escape the relativities of history and foresee the "end" of history. Either history can be consigned to meaninglessness (pessimism: despair) or the present reality can be excerpted from the relativity and made absolute (optimism: arrogance). The third alternative, suggested by Niebuhr in the form of paradox, is that man can know the end of history by faith —

⁴⁸For two examples of liberal backlash against Niebuhr's introduction of human sin into his philosophy of history, see Sidney Hook, "Intelligence and Evil in Human History: An Answer to Intellectual Defeatism," Commentary, 3 (March, 1947), 210-221; and Charles Frankel, The Case for Modern Man (New York, 1955), chapter 6.

⁴⁹"What the War Did to My Mind," The Christian Century, 45 (September 27, 1928), 1162-1163.

thus curing his despair — yet continue to function within the relativities of history — thus saving himself from arrogance.⁵⁰ The first two philosophies of history are more rational in that they do not introduce the supernatural. Niebuhr's point in Does Civilization Need Religion? was that, despite the irrationality of supernatural belief, civilization did indeed need it. He later elaborated more explicitly the need for an effective philosophy of history based upon the supernatural.⁵¹

⁵⁰The discussion below, in chapter V, explains the way in which Niebuhr elaborated this paradox in the form of an immanent-transcendent God.

⁵¹The first partially complete treatment was published in Reflections on the End of an Era, in 1934. See below, chapter V.

III

THE 1920'S (PART 2)

Reinhold Niebuhr's second book, Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic,⁵² was published in 1929. The work was in the form of a diary for Niebuhr's years in Detroit, from 1915 to 1928. Although he was at the Union Theological Seminary in 1929, many of the thoughts of this diary remain those of a young pastor in the process of developing a personal theology. For this reason the work is in some ways the most revealing of Niebuhr's books, and it serves as an intimate introduction to the man's thought.

1.

Although Does Civilization Need Religion? was published only one year before this diary was completed, there are some relevant passages in the Leaves that bear on Niebuhr's philosophy of history, and which were not brought into as sharp a focus in the earlier book.

The first point has to do with Niebuhr's Christology — and here is a clear example of the intermingling of Niebuhr's theology with his vision of history. In an entry in 1925, Niebuhr confessed that after years of questioning, he had finally found a role for the crucifixion: it was the "symbol of ultimate reality."

It is because the cross of Christ symbolizes something in the very heart of reality, something in universal experience that it has its central place in history. Life is tragic and the most perfect type of moral beauty inevitably has at least a touch of the tragic in it.⁵³

⁵²Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago, 1929; New York, 1957).

⁵³Ibid., pp. 106-107.

The two important features of this interpretation are that the Christ-image was placed at the center of historical reality, and that the image was accepted as symbolic (later to become "mythical"). A further element is the statement that "life is tragic," with the implication that the redemption from life's tragedy depends upon the symbolic reality of the cross of Christ. These images were all later developed integrally into Niebuhr's philosophy of history.⁵⁴

An entry in 1926 argued the same point:

The history of every nation and every people makes the crucifixion a perennial and a universal historical fact The cross is central in the Christian religion . . . because it symbolizes a cosmic as well as an historic truth The cross of Jesus is truly the most adequate symbol of both the strategy and the destiny of love not only in history but in the universe.⁵⁵

In this year, 1926, Niebuhr had already accepted as true the "absurdity" of the crucifixion as a perennial historical truth. He even accepted the non-scientific nature of his discovery:

The ultimate nature of reality cannot be grasped by science alone; poetic imagination is as necessary as scientific precision.⁵⁶

"Reality" was not, therefore, the exclusive province of scientific reason.

⁵⁴See Human Destiny, pp. 36-37, for a statement of the central meaning of Christ in history. Cf. also Beyond Tragedy, chapter 15.

⁵⁵Leaves, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 145. Niebuhr at this time, and later, was not hesitant about using the word "absurd" to describe his beliefs.

A good example of Niebuhr's method of introducing two polarities and then combining them to arrive at the "truth" is this entry in 1927:

Fundamentalists have at least one characteristic in common with most scientists. Neither can understand that poetic and religious imagination has a way of arriving at truth by giving a clue to the total meaning of things without being in any sense an analytic description of detailed facts.⁵⁷

The fundamentalists, who take Biblical teachings literally rather than symbolically, and the scientists, who refuse to accept either the literal or the symbolic truth of the "religious imagination," both suffer, in Niebuhr's view, from an inability to grasp the "total meaning of things." The meaning (in history) is intelligible only as fulfilled by theological (non-literal) truths. The method used to gain this answer — dialectical reasoning — is, in part, paradoxical. Neither of the two polarities is incorrect, but they fail to give meaning to their subject. Meaning is attained when the search for literal truth — whether fundamentalist or scientific — is abandoned.

This point about fundamentalism is relevant as more than an example of one of Niebuhr's polarities. His Neo-Orthodoxy and his distrust of reason created in his mind the feeling that he was "talking like a fundamentalist." He expressed this feeling in 1928 after making the following statement:

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 166-167.

They /modern religious educators/ want a completely rational faith and do not realize that they are killing religion by a complete rationalization Life is a battle between faith and reason in which each feeds on the other, drawing sustenance from it and destroying it Reason, without the balance of faith, destroys a civilization soon enough⁵⁸

Niebuhr's theology became "fundamentalist" only to the point of placing limits upon the utility of reason. More importantly, his philosophy of history became his attempt to combine "faith" and "reason" into a meaningful expression of human destiny. He was unwilling to deny one or the other in his search for meaning in history.

Niebuhr's denial that religion is "an end in itself"⁵⁹ is also typical of the thinking he was later to apply to the relationship between religion and history. In a similar way that history cannot fulfill itself, but is dependent upon a reality "beyond history," religion could not be divorced from history's relativities and made the fulfillment of life. Religion did not guarantee the millennium — that would be unveiled only at the end of history, and therefore also at the end of religion (as known by man).

One other revealing statement in this book has to do with prophets:

Philosophers are not usually prophets. They are too reasonable and circumspect to create or preserve the prophetic vision.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 188. For useful accounts of the Neo-Orthodox movement, see James M. Connolly, Human History and the Word of God (New York, 1965), pp. 105-118; and Edward J. Carnell, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (Grand Rapids, 1951), pp. 13-39.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 196.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 220.

Again, it is the prophet rather than the philosopher who appealed to Niebuhr's interpretive sense of history. His later philosophy of history was to be much more "prophetic" than "philosophic."

2.

Niebuhr's Detroit diary does not add pivotal elements to his philosophy of history, nor is there any systematization of his thinking. The change from the parish environment to the academic community at Union Theological Seminary in 1928 was a major factor in his development over the next ten years. Two other vital influences were the Depression and the coming of the Second World War.

Before following the course of his development through these years, it will be useful to look back at what Niebuhr had learned in the 1920's. Perhaps his most significant discovery — in relation to his philosophy of history — was the usefulness of paradox. Although much theological writing is supposedly paradoxical in spite of itself, in the 1920's this was not a common method of argument. Both fundamentalism and "social science" held deep roots in religious thinking;⁶¹ neither relished the accusation that they were "absurd." Niebuhr elevated — or was to elevate — absurdity into respectability in the form of paradox.

The other methodological form already evident in the 1920's was that of dialectical argument. The transference of ideas is difficult to judge, but it must be pointed out that Niebuhr's dialectical method was little different from the

⁶¹"Social science" often implies "religious" presuppositions in that a single truth — whether about man or one particular aspect of man — is believed without any significant qualification.

dialectical theology first expounded by Karl Barth in 1918 in The Epistle to the Romans. The purpose of Barth's dialectic was to maintain the transcendence of God against the relativities of history.⁶² Niebuhr did not immediately apply this dialectical method to history, but in the 1920's he did begin to argue for a higher truth from a base of two polarities.⁶³

In this connection we have also noted that, in terms of subject-matter, Niebuhr had not yet directed his attention to the problem of history. However, the arguments by which he presented his theology were the same that he was later to employ in a systematic approach to history. For this reason we are able to discover in these earlier writings many antecedents of his later philosophy of history.

The Christ-image is an especially important element in Niebuhr's thinking. He was conscious of its relevance, in 1925, as a symbolic event having perennial meaning. Later, this symbolism was to expand into a more complex system of myths by which the New Testament teachings were given an eternal meaning in history.⁶⁴ The Christ-image was also to serve as the

⁶²Cf. Thomas W. Ogletree, Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernest Troeltsch and Karl Barth (New York, 1965).

⁶³From 1928 to the 1950's Niebuhr and Barth have conducted a somewhat random "debate," with the bulk of material coming from Niebuhr's pen. D. B. Robertson has collected Niebuhr's articles on Barth for convenient study in Reinhold Niebuhr: Essays in Applied Christianity (Cleveland, 1959), pp. 141-193. For a useful review of the controversy see June Bingham, Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York, 1961), pp. 337-344.

⁶⁴See Niebuhr's article, "The Truth in Myths," in The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh (New York, 1937).

crucial point of contact between man and God — the contact through which history was given meaning.

Two particular elements that were given some mention in the 1920's are the capacity of man to do evil, and the limitations of man's critical intelligence, or, his reason. The doctrine of evil, or *sin*, was not yet elaborated to the stage in which man's arrogance before God — his pride — included his futile attempts to consummate his own history. Nor was man's fascination with the doctrine of reason yet explicitly related to his pride. Niebuhr did realize, however, that reason alone would not enable man to attain the ideal which, he suggested, fulfilled the meaning of history. In an article in 1929, he placed strictures upon the utility of man's reason, and at the same time argued the need for the irrational, the absurd:

The function of religion is to preserve life's highest irrationality, the urge toward the ideal. . . . Completely rational ideals are either completely separated from the world or reality, or completely identified with it. In either case moral vigor is lost. . . . Without faith, therefore, a reasonable life must sink into unreasonable pessimism.⁶⁵

It is perhaps too easy to read into these early writings the more mature thoughts of the later works, especially when one is dealing with so amorphous a subject as a philosophy of history. However, the later and more systematic thought is both more intelligible and less "absurd" when its roots are uncovered. It would seem apparent at this stage that whatever formal philosophy of history Niebuhr developed was not set apart from his intellectual growth as a

⁶⁵"The Unhappy Intellectuals," The Atlantic Monthly, 143 (June, 1929), 794.

whole. Nor is it especially rewarding to speak of his philosophy of history in isolation from the early thought patterns that guided its evolution. However unfair it may be to overemphasize shadowy references in early writings, it is altogether too simplistic to assume that Niebuhr's philosophy of history can be entirely understood from The Nature and Destiny of Man or Faith and History.

IV

THE EARLY 1930'S

In the decade of the Depression, Reinhold Niebuhr published five books — two in 1932, one in 1934, one in 1935, and one in 1937. He then delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in the spring and fall of 1939, and published them in 1941 and 1943. Still another book was published in 1940. Of the two books published in 1932, the first, The Contribution of Religion to Social Work,⁶⁶ is of little value in the discussion of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. The other book, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics,⁶⁷ is of some value, though its concentration is not yet directed systematically toward history.

1.

Moral Man and Immoral Society was Niebuhr's first major publication, and it established his reputation as an important American theologian. He had been known through his articles in The Christian Century and The Atlantic Monthly in the 1920's, but the appointment to the Union Theological Seminary, and the publication of a sharply worded book on contemporary society, in which the theological content was minimal, thrust him into both the secular and non-secular limelight. He has remained there ever since.

⁶⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, The Contribution of Religion to Social Work (New York, 1932).

⁶⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York, 1932).

The key argument in Moral Man and Immoral Society was that individual men could exercise certain moral restraints on their sinful tendencies, whereas men in groups were not burdened by an individual sense of morality, and were therefore capable of much greater evil. This thought was by no means new to Niebuhr's thinking. He had shown his awareness of a difference between individual and group morality in an article in 1927,⁶⁸ and in Does Civilization Need Religion? he had written that "all human groups tend to be more predatory than the individuals which compose them."⁶⁹ The difference was that in 1932 he expanded these undeveloped statements into a major thesis about man and society. The book therefore marks the beginning of Niebuhr's systematic thought — though it was not yet directed toward history.

2.

A major theme of Moral Man and Immoral Society, and one which bears upon man's relationship with history, is the inability of man's reason to control his collective behavior:

Modern educators are, like rationalists of all the ages, too enamoured of the function of reason in life. The world of history, particularly in man's collective behavior, will never be conquered by reason, unless reason uses tools, and is itself driven by forces which are not rational.⁷⁰

⁶⁸"A Critique of Pacifism," The Atlantic Monthly, 139 (May, 1927), 637-641, esp. 639.

⁶⁹Does Civilization Need Religion?, p. 129.

⁷⁰Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. xv-xvi.

But Niebuhr did not devote his whole attention to the limitations of pure reason, for he also added a chapter on the "religious resources" (and limitations) of human society. Again, we see that he set up polarities — reason and religion — and worked from them.

The weakness of reason, according to Niebuhr, was that it presumed human nature to be amenable to the logic of one particular dogmatism, i.e., reason. He traced the beginning of the assumptions of human perfectability to the Enlightenment. From that period, he wrote, rationalists have exhibited a two-fold error: (1) that man is essentially a rational creature who will submit to the force of reason, (2) that the force of reason will direct man to some type of utopia — whether it be capitalistic, socialistic, or communistic.

Although he admitted that there were "possibilities of increasing social justice through the development of mind and reason,"⁷¹ the error of the rationalists was that they assumed too much concerning both human nature and the utility of reason. Niebuhr believed that the rationalists were naive to think that "reason" would triumph over "power."

Men will not cease to be dishonest, merely because their dishonesties have been revealed or because they have discovered their own deceptions. Wherever men hold unequal power in society, they will strive to maintain it.⁷²

In addition to this, men will become less susceptible to reason and moralism, and more prone to act on impulse, when they congregate in groups.⁷³

⁷¹Ibid., p. 34.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., p. 35.

This gloomy analysis of the nature of man is not the sort of thinking that an optimistic social scientist (or a politician) would be likely to produce. The portion of truth from which Niebuhr expanded into a polarity his doctrine concerning the limitation of reason is the following:

Even the most rational men are never quite rational
when their own interests are at stake.⁷⁴

The problem with reason was that it could not get outside itself. Or more precisely, the man who used reason exclusively would still have to admit that he was acting within history, with all of the relativity and preconditioning that is implied by an act within history. Reason could not, therefore, be the final arbitrator for the self because even reason was dependent upon the person who used it. When this line of argument was applied to men in groups, the efficacy of a truly impartial reason became correspondingly more tenuous.

Although he was seeking primarily to criticize the extensive assumptions that rationalists made concerning the use of reason in society as a whole, Niebuhr also drew into the discussion some comment upon the individual ego. He made a tentative step toward defining human self-consciousness -- "the fruit of reason" -- as the instrument which caused man to seek the infinite. Man became aware of his finitude, and at the same instant recognized the possibility of the eternal.⁷⁵ This conflict within man -- later elaborated and designated as a prime reason for man's search for meaning in history -- was not here developed.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 44.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁷⁶See Human Nature, pp. 182-186.

But a vital question arises: if man must be wary of his own reason, by what means shall he direct his life? The answer to this is not simple, and Niebuhr did not intend to give an easy solution. Furthermore, the emphasis of Moral Man and Immoral Society was not theological. But the pessimistic analysis of human nature, as shown in the light of reason (with Niebuhr's help) implied an effort to supply some further "resources" to bolster up man's vision of himself and society.⁷⁷

In terms of his philosophy of history, this chapter on man's "rational resources" was the first systematic attack on man's "critical intelligence." In this sense the dike was thereafter opened for the promulgation of a philosophy of history based on presuppositions other than man's reason. This systematic treatment was not contained in Moral Man and Immoral Society, but it is important that the systematic groundwork was being laid, in 1932, for his later philosophy of history.

3.

The "resources" by which Niebuhr presumed to put the pessimism (or optimism) of a purely rational vision of history into equilibrium, were those of religion. Religion provided "a sense of the absolute."

Viewed from the relative perspectives of the historic scene, there is no human action which cannot be justified in terms of some historic purpose or approved in comparison with some less virtuous action. The absolute reference of religion eliminates these partial perspectives and premature justifications.⁷⁸

⁷⁷See below section 3 of this chapter.

⁷⁸Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 52.

An absolute, in the form of religion, was Niebuhr's answer to the relativities of history.

Niebuhr understood the despair of men who recognized the existence of an ideal, yet who saw no way to realize that ideal in history.⁷⁹ On the other hand, he decided that those who did profess to see progress in history, and who located the ideal within the historical process, must have some stake in the particular "progress" that was made, and the "ideal" that was identified.⁸⁰ More simply, the privileged classes do not "suffer as much as the disinherited from the brutalities of contemporary society, and therefore do not take as catastrophic a view of contemporary history."⁸¹ In the eyes of the disinherited — and the "truly religious man" — it was not man who redeemed history but God.

But this was not, according to Niebuhr, a call for complete religious moralism in judging history. He felt it to be an "obvious fact" that "no nation in history has ever been known to be purely unselfish in its actions."⁸² Here was a warning that religious idealism, no less than rational idealism, needed to be tempered at every step by a "realistic" appraisal of man's position within the relativities of history. The realization that man acted within history, and yet was in possession of an ideal whose source was above history, did not remove from man the responsibility of making decisions commensurate with the facts — however relative — that were presented. To do otherwise would be either to lapse into sentimentality or to abdicate from human history and escape to an "ivory tower."

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 61.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 62.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., p. 75.

In spite of this warning — this limitation placed on the religious "resource" — the value of religion to human history was not in doubt.

Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.⁸³

The passage is representative of an important element in Niebuhr's philosophy of history. This is the belief that human wisdom could only approximate the ideal society, and that the utopian religious visions, when applied to history, were illusions. Yet at the same time these illusions were "true"; they were an "impossible ideal" that ought to be possible but was not. This was a paradox: man should live by an impossible ideal.

By arguing in this way, Niebuhr had committed his vision of history to certain presuppositions. The first was that a fulfillment to history was impossible by means of human reason and wisdom. The second was that the supernatural ideal, assumed by a religious interpretation, was also incapable of realization within history. It was an impossible vision, and the hope that it would be achieved within history was an illusion. The first presupposition was entirely earth-bound: its limits (i.e., those of man's reason) were explicit, and it had no further assistance to render man's historical dilemma. The second alternative also failed to fulfill human history. But it was a supernatural

⁸³Ibid., p. 81.

presupposition: would this be of any value for man within history?

"Realistically" it would not — it was an impossible ideal, capable only of being approximated. In 1932, Niebuhr did not pursue this problem. Later, the value of the "true illusion" was found: it gave meaning to history.⁸⁴ In Moral Man and Immoral Society Niebuhr did not fully consider the problem of history, and his systematic analysis of rational and religious presuppositions did not logically instill history with anything but meaninglessness.

4.

The rest of Moral Man and Immoral Society did not add significantly to Niebuhr's philosophy of history. There were times when he spoke of the "perennial tragedy of human history," the "spiritual and brutal elements in human life," and "the end of history," but these referenees were more rhetori-eal than systematic. His coneentration remained upon man's relations with him-self in society, upon his ethics, and his politics. Man's relationship with his own history and with God were not included in the discussion.

Niebuhr did, in these early years of the Depression, display a strong interest in Marxism. In 1931 he noted, with appreciation, that the communist vision of history was "catastrophic and apocalyptic rather than evolutionary."⁸⁵ His own philosophy of history was far from evolutionary, though he had not yet systematieally explained its apocalyptic tone. In regard to the Marxian vision

⁸⁴See the first chapter of Beyond Tragedy, which is entitled "As Deceivers, Yet True."

⁸⁵"The Religion of Communism," The Atlantic Monthly, 147 (April, 1931), 463.

of history, he went on to warn that its absoluteness placed it in "the category of religious overbeliefs rather than that of scientific truths."⁸⁶ His own philosophy of history also became divorced from "scientific truths," but he did not create the "overbelief" of absolutizing his dogma within history.

In 1932, Niebuhr was not unaware of the relationship between his view of man, society, and history. He could refer to the failure of man to achieve his "highest ideals" in "social and collective terms" as a perennial tragedy of history. And he even made the direct reference to "beyond history" in relation to man's life in history:

It is inevitable that religious imagination should set goals beyond history.⁸⁷

But this suggestion was not elaborated, either in his articles or in Moral Man and Immoral Society.

He did no more than use history to support his arguments concerning man and society. For example, the following passage is indicative of his discussion of formal "philosophy of history" in the early 1930's.

Any philosophy of history which proceeds under the assumption that a religious change of heart or type of social education will make one economic group perfectly ethical toward another economic group without some pressure from the underprivileged group, is discredited by the facts of history.⁸⁸

Philosophy of history was subservient to the "facts of history." Niebuhr was to retain a portion of this emphasis, but not in the simple form expressed here.

⁸⁶Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 167.

⁸⁷"Must We Do Nothing?" The Christian Century, 49 (March 30, 1932), 417.

⁸⁸"Socialism and Christianity," The Christian Century, 48 (Aug. 19, 1931), 1039.

His philosophy of history was to break away from history enough to assume a certain independence from the relativity of history's facts.

Although Moral Man and Immoral Society contributed nothing to Niebuhr's systematic philosophy of history aside from the bounds placed upon reason, and the presupposition that the fulfillment of history was "beyond history," the book did offer several suggestive arguments that were later to become important.

Niebuhr recognized the problem of absolutism early in the 1930's — if not before. He judged that much of the economic misery in the world was the result of situations which lent themselves to destructive, absolutist tendencies in men. However, he did not jump in the other direction.

Absolutism, in both religious and political idealism, is a splendid incentive to heroic action, but a dangerous guide in immediate and concrete situations. In religion it permits absurdities and in politics cruelties, which fail to achieve justifying consequences because the inertia of human nature remains a nemesis to the absolute ideal.⁸⁹

Niebuhr was unwilling to grant to reason the assurance of absolute relevance; neither would he absolutize a religious idealism. Instead, he was to depend upon the less certain support of paradox. If this produced absurdities — and it did — they were less dangerous, Niebuhr felt, than those rendered by arguments which explicitly pronounced the Truth in the form of an Absolute.

I have suggested above that Niebuhr's philosophy of history at this time was little more than a device for marshalling facts to support a presupposition. This tendency to submit his philosophy of history to the test of history's "facts"

⁸⁹Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 199.

remained with Niebuhr. The unanswerable question concerns the interpretation given to the facts — whether they support one philosophy of history or another. Nevertheless, the desire to match his philosophy in some way with history's relativities remained important for Niebuhr. This desire is illustrated throughout Moral Man and Immoral Society. For example, after a perceptive analysis of the relations between whites and Negroes in America — in which he wrote that Negroes would never achieve complete emancipation "merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race" — he argued that

the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.⁹⁰

Niebuhr not only felt that history could somehow "justify," but that this justification allowed one to be dogmatic. He was never so bold in expounding his supra-historical justifications. It may well be that the assertive words were more rhetorical than significant. The historian of ideas does run the risk of mistaking the thunder and lightning for the rain.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 252-253.

V

THE MIDDLE 1930'S (PART 1)

With Reflections on the End of an Era,⁹¹ published in 1934, we come to the first major work in Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy of history. The book is not wholly, nor even primarily, devoted to philosophy of history, but of its twenty chapters several are genuine landmarks in the systematic exposition of his philosophy of history. The hope for this book was the following:

Perhaps they /the "reflections"/ will help a little to shake the easy faith by which the actual and tragic facts of contemporary history are, in the opinion of the present writer, obscured.⁹²

The shaking of the "easy faith" necessitated — in addition to other factors — a new vision of history for men in the middle 1930's. A new meaning for history needed to be made explicit.⁹³

1.

Perhaps the most important chapter is that entitled "Mythology and History." In this chapter, Niebuhr spoke of the kind of philosophy of history which he deemed adequate, and he discussed the importance of meaning in history. A philosophy of history must relate the empiricism of the scientist to the imagination of the artist, in addition to adding "religious depth to philosophical generalizations."

⁹¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York, 1934).

⁹²Ibid., p. x.

⁹³Hans Hofmann has offered a useful discussion of Niebuhr's philosophy of history in Reflections on the End of an Era. See The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 68-88.

An adequate philosophy of history must . . . be a mythology rather than a philosophy A vision of the whole is possible only if it is assumed that human history has meaning; and modern empiricism is afraid of that assumption. Meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology.⁹⁴

The problem with "modern empiricist" philosophies of history was that they were not aware of the mythology underlying their own interpretations, and were therefore unable to plumb the depths of history and its tragedy.⁹⁵ To be genuinely useful, a mythology of history "must be able to do justice to the suggestions of meaning in momentary chaos." And yet, even a philosophy of history based upon mythology could not be

absolutely true in the sense that it is the only possible interpretation of all the facts. But neither can it be assumed that a science of history which disavows mythology is more accurate in its description of the detailed facts.⁹⁶

Niebuhr here bluntly announced his intention of finding meaning in history through recourse to mythology — which to Niebuhr meant the supernatural.⁹⁷ Although he spoke of a "mythology of history," it is still appropriate to refer to his analysis as a philosophy of history. The point at issue is the presuppositions that are held. All philosophies of history hold certain "givens" as the basis of their meaning. It is obvious that, in 1934, Niebuhr was intent upon applying supernatural insights to derive meaning from history.

⁹⁴Reflections on the End of an Era, pp. 122-123.

⁹⁵Ibid., pp. 123-124.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 124.

⁹⁷Hans Hofmann has argued that myth provides, for Niebuhr, the key to the understanding of history. (The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 73.)

2.

With the presupposition of Niebuhr's philosophy of history expressed more systematically than it had been previously, we can now explore the manner in which he developed — with a vigor appropriate to his writing in 1934 — its ramifications.

The justification for holding any philosophy of history at all was succinctly expressed in this way:

Interpretations of history actually tend to verify themselves, when rigorously held, because they direct the course of history toward an imagined inevitable goal.⁹⁸

It was thus not a hopeless pursuit to believe in a particular philosophy of history. This argument is reminiscent of the "relevance of the impossible" (which itself was not systematized until the following year). There had been suggestions earlier in Niebuhr's writings that he saw justification for an "obviously" absurd belief. A mythological philosophy of history was by definition absurd to a rational man — yet it would, "when rigorously held," "direct the course of history toward an imagined inevitable goal." The rational man is incapable of repudiating such an "imagined inevitable goal," for his philosophy cannot analyze a goal when it is based upon supernaturalism. Rather, the "goal" can only be rejected, or excluded from discussion.

Niebuhr devoted over ten pages in this chapter to a comparison of Augustinian, Jewish, and Marxist philosophies of history.⁹⁹ The most significant

⁹⁸ Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 125.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 124-136.

similarity, according to Niebuhr, was the Marxist and Christian sense of an apocalypse. In this respect, Marxian thought was closer to Jewish apocalypticism than to Hellenistic interpretations of history. In the latter, reason was the key to man's life, and was the instrument by which history was transcended. Contrary to this, "in Jewish religion there is always the hope that history itself will be redeemed and that spirit will reduce its confusions to order and harmony."¹⁰⁰ The key to transcendence was spirit rather than reason.

However, "Christian orthodoxy," according to Niebuhr — and this is a point that he was to make repeatedly in his later writings, had followed the Greek emphasis upon the transcendence of reason rather than the Jewish-prophetic choice of the spirit.¹⁰¹

If one studied the thought of Jesus and the early church it would be evident that they were "truer to the Jewish interpretation of the relation of the spirit to nature," and "lived by the hope that history itself was to be redeemed."¹⁰² The last part of this passage explains what is meant by the apocalypse: rather than the redemption of man through reason, the end of history would redeem history itself. This difficult concept is one that can be understood only by recourse to the spirit, rather than a reliance upon reason. It is possible for man to use reason to plan his own redemption. But when reason is applied to the whole of history, that device becomes incapable of encompassing the heights and depths of history's tragedy, and therefore reason cannot redeem history — it cannot give

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁰¹See Human Nature, pp. 4-12.

¹⁰²Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 133.

meaning to history. The spirit, and the force of faith (even if it be "absurd"), does have the necessary capacity.

The "genuine" Christian interpretation anticipated the end of history as an apocalypse, which was in the tradition of the prophets. The "liberal Christian" view of history (e.g., as taught by John Dewey) did not interpret an "end" but rather a steadily increasing growth of humanity — by means of reason — toward the millennium. The apocalypse was not necessary, for man, through reason, would redeem himself. In contradistinction to this, Marxism foresaw that the "reason" employed was merely directed toward maintaining the prerogatives of one class, and that class alone was heading toward its own utopia. For the rest of mankind to follow, the present civilization must be destroyed — there must come, in other words, an apocalypse. Up to this point, the Marxist philosophy of history closely paralleled the prophetic vision, but the break came when, after the apocalypse, the Marxist vision predicted that the proletarian class would assume the reins of leadership in the drive toward the millennium. The redemption of history would again be in the hands of a human rather than a spiritual force. Niebuhr, in his later writings, spelled out this "error" in the Marxist philosophy of history more explicitly.¹⁰³

It should not be assumed that Niebuhr intended to resolve the conflict between spirit and nature (or faith and reason) by pronouncing a spiritual interpretation of history to be more accurate. A central aim of Niebuhr's thought was to assure that man would not feel justified in absolutizing any one vision of himself

¹⁰³See Human Destiny, pp. 86-87, and Faith and History, pp. 160-161.

and his history. Whatever absolute did exist, would need to wait until the end of history in order to be fully accepted by man. Tension would remain as a safeguard against man's pride within history:

The tension between spirit and nature must remain to the end of history lest the impulses of nature clothe themselves with the moral prestige of the spiritual and secure a moral immunity behind which they express themselves without moral restraint.¹⁰⁴

3.

The chapter entitled "The Conflict Between Christianity and Communism" offers some insight into the comparison of Marxist and prophetic philosophies of history. Niebuhr made an effort to explain the differences between the two world outlooks. One important factor was that communism pretended to arise from a scientific base. In like manner with the "irreligious naturalism of bourgeois culture," communism tried to invest history with purpose and meaning through a scientific analysis of the "facts."

In both cases it is denied that this purpose has a conscious author or that there is any revelation of his intent in anything but the facts of history themselves.¹⁰⁵

Thus, the communist and bourgeois philosophies were both naturalistic in that they denied any supernatural influence.

Niebuhr believed that the "actual contemporary facts of history," justified "the more pessimistic proletarian philosophy of history much more than the purely

¹⁰⁴Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 136. Cf. Faith and History, pp. 212-215.

¹⁰⁵Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 193.

optimistic bourgeois view."¹⁰⁶ In spite of this, communism was too certain — too absolute — in its faith in the "scientific analysis" of history's "facts." It failed to understand that its view of history was based upon a faith, and in this sense it was religious.

Nevertheless its confident faith, that good will grow out of disaster, belongs definitely to the category of mythology rather than science. Both the bourgeois idea of progress and the Marxian idea of salvation through catastrophe express a faith in the character of life and history which is religious rather than scientific.¹⁰⁷

Thus, one part of the problem with the Marxist philosophy was that it did not recognize the non-scientific basis, or presupposition, of its methodology. Its methodology was "scientific" in that it excluded the supernatural, but this in itself was a form of religion. It was Niebuhr's belief that any world-view that found "the mechanisms of the cosmos either neutrally amenable, or profoundly sympathetic to human ideals," was mythological and religious.¹⁰⁸ This was so because if one understood the universe, one had — in a sense — conquered it. Since man had "conquered" the universe he must therefore have made it relevant to himself. There being no scientific method to show man's relevance to his history — i.e., to demonstrate the meaning of man within history, any system of thought that claimed to do this must be religious. It was not necessary to presuppose a "conscious author" behind history's meaning — as neither bourgeois naturalism nor communism did — because the devices of mechanism and rationalism explained enough to satisfy the naturalist. But for one who probed underneath the naturalistic cover, it was evident that the system was indeed a religion, and

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 196.

therefore liable to criticism for not accepting or recognizing that fact.

In spite of this failure to accept themselves as forms of religion, how adequate — religiously — were bourgeois naturalism and proletarian communism? According to Niebuhr, these two interpretations had elements of "irreligion" in them which weakened their ability to give meaning to history.

For a full-orbed religion not only interprets all events in history in terms of an ultimate meaning, but it also believes that this meaning and purpose transcend any immediate event or fact in historical reality.¹⁰⁹

The mistake of those philosophies which relied only on the "facts" was that they were helpless to escape the relativity of those facts — they could not really transcend history and could not therefore give true meaning to life.

It the meaning of life cannot have anything to do with scientific adequacy because science cannot concern itself with the ultimate character and meaning of reality.¹¹⁰

For Niebuhr, the "ultimate" meaning of reality was to be found through supernatural guidance.

The reason that "ultimate" reality was the province of the supernatural was that man was unable to escape the relativities of history sufficiently to decide upon an "ultimate."

The canons of logic and rationality are transcended when reason attempts to comprehend the final irrationality of things. Ultimate world-views therefore seem more or less rational to given ages and eras because they satisfy the temper of the day by doing justice to those facts which the age regards as particularly important.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 197.

¹¹⁰Ibid., pp. 197-198.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 198.

The "irreligion" that was imbedded in the scientific attempts to pronounce meaning in history was this effort to make ultimate the vision of one particular historical era. The other side of this double-edged sword — i.e., scientific attempts to find meaning in history — was the failure of reason to transcend what is reasonable. The idea of finding meaning in history by escaping from it and looking down from above directly contradicts the canons of reason. If it is decided that meaning in history cannot be discovered by viewing the facts within history, then the meaning must be found in the supernatural, or in the irrational.¹¹² Bourgeois naturalism and proletarian communism were unprepared — with their reliance on "science" — to cope with the irrational.

If we continue with this logic — as Niebuhr did — we must accept the "ultimate reality" of the absurd. It is significant that in Reflections on the End of an Era Niebuhr, for the first time, made ample use of scriptural references in order to defend his argument. Almost in spite of himself, he was forced to become a theologian with unshielded theological suppositions.

Though it is never easy to relate the God of holiness and perfection, conceived by the religious imagination, with the actual facts of nature and history, an adequate mythology never fails to commit the rational absurdity of conceiving God as at once the pinnacle and the basis of reality, the goal toward which life is striving and the force by which it strives.¹¹³

¹¹²N. P. Jacobson, in an article based upon Human Destiny, concluded that "Niebuhr's philosophy of history is erected upon his concept of super-history," and that meaning is derived from that super-historical foundation. ("Niebuhr's Philosophy of History," The Harvard Theological Review, 37 /October, 1944/, 241.)

¹¹³Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 200.

The "rational absurdity" had now become an integral part of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. God was the agent who assured reality and was also reality itself. No further questioning was possible: God was an Absolute, for he was both reality and the basis for reality.

In addition to this fact about God, it was also evident that God was "beyond history." He was an absolute that was not subject to historical relativities or to scientific analysis. But a further problem arises: how can such a God have any relevance to human history? What are the "points of contact" between God and man? This is the problem that ultimately separates the "believers" from the "non-believers," the naturalists from the supernaturalists. One may argue that Niebuhr's analysis was adequate without introducing the "rational absurdity" of a God who actually made contact with history.¹¹⁴ What would be wrong with a transcendent being who did not become involved in history, and who allowed the world to operate much as a mechanism? With this belief one is at least not obligated to show evidence for one's faith.

Niebuhr's answer to this was that the active connection between man and God was vital to history:

It [Christian theism] is forced to insist upon this connection lest, having solved the problem of life by finding its centre of meaning, it lose the solution by placing the centre so high above the realities of nature and history that there are lost again in chaos and mechanism.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴Sidney Hook made this point -- without answering it -- in a review of Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought (New York, 1956). (New York Times Book Review /January 29, 1956/, p. 7.)

¹¹⁵Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 200.

A merely transcendent God would be inadequate for a philosophy of history because it would release man from any moral obligations within history. God must also be immanent:

Christian theism has solved this problem by its conception of a transcendent-immanent God, a conception which can never be fully rationalized but which does justice both to the moral necessities of human life and to the actual facts of human experience¹¹⁶

Niebuhr was never able to separate his philosophy from ethical considerations within human history. He is better known as a teacher of Applied Christianity and Christian ethics than as a theologian or a philosopher. This major aspect of his thought was evidently one force that impelled him to preach a transcendent-immanent God, rather than the somewhat less absurd transcendent God. He recognized the loss in rational terms of this insistence.¹¹⁷

This was also the point at which Niebuhr broke sharply with the theology of Karl Barth and the so-called Barthian School. The Barthians wanted to separate completely the transcendent from the immanent God. The argument which they used was more logical and consistent than any which Niebuhr could muster. There was no rational way for the immanent God to escape the realities of history, with the implication that the corruption of this immanent God would also stain the transcendent God. To avoid this, the Barthian School postulated a transcendent God who was completely beyond the ebb and flow of

¹¹⁶Ibid., pp. 200-201.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 201.

history. This is the argument that spurred the renewal of Protestant theology in Europe after Barth's Epistle to the Romans in 1918.¹¹⁸

Niebuhr's criticism of these theologies was that they

cannot finally avail because in them religious pessimism becomes too consistent and renounces the significance and virtue of human history from the perspective of the very ideal through which life has been saved from chaos and meaninglessness.¹¹⁹

Niebuhr could not understand the reason for endowing history with meaning through a transcendent God, but then reducing history to chaos by renouncing the immanence of God. The paradox in Niebuhr's argument is obvious: he developed the concept of a transcendent God by pleading the danger of a philosophy of history subservient to the relativities of history. He then transformed his transcendent God into a transcendent-immanent God so that man would have some basis for ethical action within the relativities of history.¹²⁰

Earlier in this section it was pointed out that one part of the error of Marxist philosophy of history was that the religious — non-scientific — presupposition of that philosophy was not recognized by its proponents. The

¹¹⁸ Donald B. Meyer has made the point that Niebuhr was far more influenced by Paul Tillich than by Barth. (The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941 / Berkeley, 1960/, pp. 272-273.) Tillich's book, The Interpretation of History, was first published in English in 1936. For an appreciative discussion by Niebuhr of Tillich's book, see the last four pages of his article, "The Contribution of Paul Tillich," Religion in Life, 6 (Autumn, 1937), 574-581. See also Tillich's short essay, "Sin and Grace in the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Harold R. Landon, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time (Greenwich, Conn., 1962).

¹¹⁹ Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 202.

¹²⁰ For further discussion of the significance of Niebuhr's concept of an immanent God, see section 4 of this chapter.

other half of the error is that the end of history — the period after the apocalypse — is placed within history rather than beyond it. In this way, man remains subject to the relativities of history, and history has therefore not reached its end in a genuine apocalypse. The meaning given to history by the Marxian philosophy of history is therefore inaccurate because the end of history has not been understood. It is logical — according to Niebuhr — that meaning cannot be interpreted unless the end of human history is accepted, for otherwise there would be no assurance that the proposed meaning was not a reflection of one particular historical era.

Niebuhr summarized the philosophies of history of naturalism, communism, and Christianity in this way:

Judged by the criteria of optimism and pessimism the difference between bourgeois naturalism, communism and classical Christianity is that the first is purely optimistic because it finds ethical values completely immanent in the processes of nature and history. Communism is partially pessimistic because it finds the historical process of the moment running to its socio-moral ideal. But it is ultimately optimistic because it believes an organization of society possible in which the chaos of egoistic impulse will be fully overcome.¹²¹

The optimism associated with prophetic Christianity — in the form of a meaning in history — is different from other optimisms due to a more profound

¹²¹Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 203. Donald B. Meyer reviewed Niebuhr's analysis in this way: "All modern philosophies of history — whether evolutionary with the liberals, or catastrophic with Marxists — were mistaken in their belief that the possibilities of chaos and evil could be progressively eliminated." (Protestant Search for Political Realism, op. cit., p. 303.)

accompanying pessimism. This pessimism refers to the fact that history is unable to fulfill itself — man cannot fulfill himself, or alone attribute meaning to his life.

Niebuhr concluded this important chapter by warning against the perfectionism associated with "liberal Christianity." There is a suggestion of his developing emphasis upon man's inevitable sinfulness and the fact that the highest good accomplished by man is also replete with the potentiality for the highest evil due to the "egoistic impulse" of sinful man.¹²² It is this fact that helps to make a transcendent God necessary, contrary to the hopes of liberal Christianity which denies man's inevitable sinfulness.

4.

A third significant chapter in Reflections on the End of an Era — sequentially the last in the book — is that entitled "The Assurance of Grace." When Niebuhr decided that an immanent God was necessary for human history, the problem of "points of contact" between this God and man became important. How was man "assured" that this God was immanent? How was his grace manifest within history?¹²³

¹²²Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 204.

¹²³N. P. Jacobson, a religious naturalist, attempted to give an account of the "empirical data" that Niebuhr supposedly used to "demonstrate the pull of the transcendent upon man." ("Niebuhr's Philosophy of History," op. cit., 241-245.) Jacobson misses the point when he tries to analyze Niebuhr's evidence, for he applies a rational method of criticism to prophetic pre-suppositions.

Niebuhr recognized the "tension" that existed when man both lived in nature and was aware of the possibility of the reality of the spirit. It was to be hoped that this spirit, this "religion of grace," would "console the human spirit to its inevitable defeat in the world of nature and history."¹²⁴ In addition to serving as a spiritual balm for man's tensions, this "pure religion" would also encourage man to maintain a degree of morality within the relativities of history.¹²⁵ (This latter purpose is the argument for an immanent God which was pointed out in the previous section.)

Niebuhr's philosophy of history now became more theological, as he attempted to demonstrate the validity of the immanent God.¹²⁶ His argument also became more obscure — at least from the vantage point of analysis. He interpreted human history as evidence of both grace and judgment. This presumably correlates with the two-fold nature of God, as both immanent and transcendent. Only a transcendent God could act as a final judge, and, because of man's sin, "every life deserves destruction."¹²⁷ When Niebuhr wrote that

¹²⁴Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 279.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 280.

¹²⁶Hans Hofmann felt assured, in following Niebuhr's increasingly theological language, to speak of his "theological" interpretations of history. The Christ-event, upon which we will soon elaborate, was the key, for "reflection upon the Christ-event . . . /is/ the basis of the understanding of history." (The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 119.) Hofmann went on to suggest that, for Niebuhr, theology and the interpretation of history were closely inter-related, since the Christ-event was central to both. Niebuhr could not speak either of theology or of history without reference to the other, yet he did, according to Hofmann, keep them separate: (The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Ibid., p. 204.)

¹²⁷Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 286.

"the facts of history lend themselves both to cynical and to religious interpretations,"¹²⁸ he must have meant that a wholly transcendent interpretation of God is liable to contribute to cynicism in man's attitude toward his history. A transcendent-immanent interpretation, by contrast, assured grace as well as judgment.

The problem remained of how to demonstrate this grace. Niebuhr's answer — which he elaborated in this chapter — was this:

The religious imagination sees truly when it regards the slow processes of history and the impartialities of nature as revelations of divine mercy.¹²⁹

Grace — the proof of the immanent God — was evident to those possessed with the "religious imagination."

Niebuhr understood that faith alone was not enough. "Symbols" — manifestations — were needed.

Religious faith needs specific symbols; and the Jesus of history is a perfect symbol of the absolute in history because the perfect love to which pure spirit aspires is vividly realized in the drama of his life and cross. Thus a man becomes the symbol of God and the religious sense that the absolute invades the relative and the historical is adequately expressed.¹³⁰

Throughout Niebuhr's writing, the Jesus of history was to be the most adequate symbol for the immanency of God.¹³¹ Niebuhr's Christology is an important,

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 286.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 287.

¹³¹In contrast, D. R. Davies interpreted Niebuhr's concept of the Last Judgment as dominant in his philosophy of history. Davies is correct insofar as philosophy of history is confined to a study of the meaning of history. (Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America /New York, 1945/, pp. 53-54, and 65.)

and sometimes overlooked, element in his theology.¹³² The drama of Jesus life provided the perfect symbol: the absolute within the relative, and the lesson of love by which grace was available to man. Niebuhr later expressed more fully the meaning of this "sacrificial love" (agape) in contrast to "mutual love," which is not without a degree of human egoism.¹³³ Grace is tendered by means of agape, and the cross represents, through Christ, the proof of this love in history. Thus, the important point of contact between God and man is made, and God is shown to be immanent.

Although Niebuhr accepted Jesus as the "perfect symbol" of the immanency of God, he was not blind to the fears of "liberal Christians," who felt the symbol of Jesus to be imperfect since it was historical. It involved "a man living in Galilee and speaking the language of a particular time and place."¹³⁴

If this criticism were granted, Niebuhr felt, the task of "relating the absolute to history" would be unduly complicated. A spiritual balm (grace) would not be available to the human spirit. A "balm" was needed which demonstrated not only that faith and history were in conflict, but also that there was "some ultimate resolution and reconciliation in the conflict."¹³⁵ The argument over Jesus' existence in a particular historical period versus his claim to transcendence over history weakened the claim for the immanency of God.

¹³²See Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit.

¹³³See Human Destiny, pp. 70-97.

¹³⁴Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 287.

¹³⁵Ibid.

The long controversy about the two natures of Christ in the history of Christian theology represents the futile effort of reason to comprehend or to define the mythological absurdities and profundities of the original myth.¹³⁶

"Reason," says Niebuhr, cannot comprehend the truth of Jesus' transcendent character. The symbol is a "mythological absurdity," yet it is profound. The next question to be asked is why this particular event — the Christ-event — is accepted as the significant "mythological absurdity."

The dialectical theology of the Barthian School recognized the difficulty of this question, and therefore lifted the Christ-event itself out of history and made it not a symbol of God's immanence, with all of the "mythological absurdity" thereby implied, but the single intervention by God into history. The incarnation did not demonstrate God's immanence but rather his single venture into history to expose the Truth to the witness of man. God remained a completely transcendent being.¹³⁷

Niebuhr's disagreement with this thinking was definite. He felt that such an interpretation could find

no meaning in history or nature except as the one event in history (the incarnation) illumines the scene. It is significant too that this one event in history really ceases to be an event in history and that the symbol of the absolute never really becomes incarnate.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 288.

¹³⁷ Cf. Donald B. Meyer, The Protestant Search for Political Realism, op. cit., pp. 248-249.

¹³⁸ Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 289.

Niebuhr would not accept an interpretation of the "perfect symbol" which did not justify the immanence of God.

Niebuhr was also unhappy with the interpretation of the Christ-event given by liberal Christianity. In contrast to the "consistent dualism and pessimism" of dialectical theology, liberal Christianity seemed to offer "a more plausible rationalism."¹³⁹

It believes that the Jesus of history was a symbol of the absolute because he personifies 'the highest human values.' The goodness of human nature and finally the ethical character of history itself are thus the revelations of the absolute. If this seems more plausible and rational to our day than the position of Christian orthodoxy it is only because our culture has been an optimistic one and it has not realized what frustrations and defeats the spirit meets in the impulse of history and nature.¹⁴⁰

There is, in this passage, an almost sarcastic epitomisation of the liberal Christian attempt to identify relative human concepts of goodness with the absolute ethics of Jesus. It is logical that one should identify one's own image of human nature and ethical codes with an absolute. In an optimistic culture, the force of logic does not know the illogical depths and insoluble frustrations to which the human spirit is exposed. The attempt to transfer the relative ethics (and optimism) of one historical era to the absolute of the Christ-event is to destroy the meaning of that event, and to delude those who accept its revelatory nature.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

Niebuhr's complaint against dialectical theology was that it separated so completely "the absolute and the relative, the divine and the human, the spiritual and the natural," that

the ultimate faith of religion in the meaningfulness of life rests upon one event in history which is not truly historical. Religion is thus reduced to magic.¹⁴¹

The problem with liberal Christianity was that the "tension between spirit and nature" was not recognized. The result of this failure was that "all history and nature (including human nature)" was "invested prematurely with the aura of the absolute and the perfect."

In both cases rationalism has destroyed the original mythological profundity of the Christian religion which sought to express the idea that the conflict between spirit and nature is a real conflict, that no complete victory of spirit in history is possible, but that defeat is turned into victory when the unachieved perfection is discovered to be a forgiving love which justifies (understands) man's imperfection.¹⁴²

The last point, about "man's imperfection," is a key to Niebuhr's "pessimism" in regard to his philosophy of history. Rationalism as it is used by both dialectical theologians and liberal theologians could not fully take account of man's sin. The tension by which man both created and destroyed was snapped.

When put in rational terms this experience [of Grace] means that the man who is involved in the relativities of the natural and historical process finds himself nevertheless in contact with the final and the absolute life which is above the process. Thus the tension between the absolute and the relative is overcome.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 290.

¹⁴³Ibid.

It is possible to put in rational terms the relationship between the relative and the absolute, and thus release the tension.

But the rationalization of the mythos robs it of some of its significance. In purely rational terms the sin of man becomes merely the imperfection and relativity inherent in the process of history and the sense of personal responsibility for evil actions is lost.¹⁴⁴

The problem with the dialectical and liberal theologies was that they rationalized away the tension between man's existence within the relativities of history and his awareness of the absolute which is beyond history. For this reason the concept of sin was blunted, and imperfect man felt himself justified.

The inclination to rationalize the mythological absurdity must be resisted, says Niebuhr. Otherwise the effort to postulate a transcendent God is in vain, and man is left with no moral rudder by which to guide his life through the relativities of history.

The experience of grace, in short, can only be expressed in mythological terms if it is not to become a peril to the ethical life. For only in the concepts of religious myth can an imperfect world mirror the purposes of a divine Creator and can the mercy of God make the fact of sin and imperfection bearable without destroying moral responsibility for the evil of imperfection or obscuring its realities in actual history.¹⁴⁵

A central fact that the modern era did not realize was that evil could not be eliminated.¹⁴⁶

The "points of contact" between man and an immanent God were not, therefore, an accumulation of historical events. At least Niebuhr did not — in 1934 — enumerate such a list, which would have been comparable to a list

¹⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 290-291.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 293-294.

of "miracles," such as those expounded by various religions, including Roman Catholicism. Niebuhr made explicit only the one historical event of Christ.

The other signs of God's immanency were to be taken on faith even more completely than the semi-historical Christ-event. The important factor here was the nature of the self. The ego must recognize "that the blind forces of nature which frustrate the spirit are in the self as well as outside it."¹⁴⁷ The suggestion from "classical Christianity" that "repentance is the beginning of redemption," and even that "it is synonymous with redemption" is a profound insight.¹⁴⁸ This is so because

the evils and frustrations of life and history would be, in fact, unbearable if contrition did not reduce the presumptions and pretensions of the self and reveal the fact that some of the confusions from which the spirit suffers have their direct source in the chaos of the self and that others may be regarded as punishment for the sins of the self even if they have not been obviously caused by them.¹⁴⁹

The burden of man's sin lies heavily in Niebuhr's philosophy of history. In this theological concept, the bond between man and the God immanent in history was sealed. Man feels the frustration of his life in history because he is aware of the possibility of redemption from it. In order to initiate the redemptive process, man must show repentance. The redemptive process is the link between the immanent God and man, and it is also connected with the transcendent God, since when man is redeemed he is beyond the relativities of history and in the company of a God who is also beyond those relativities, i.e., a

¹⁴⁷Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

transcendent God. Thus, there is a close connection between the immanent and transcendent God, and we are justified in speaking of an immanent-transcendent God (paradoxical as that may seem).

When man shows repentance, he demonstrates two things. The first is that man is admitting that he has sinned, and shows the necessary contrition. The second evident fact is that man has made real, through faith, the immanency of God. Man has recognized the "mythological absurdity" as a reality by himself participating in irrationality, i.e., by showing repentance for sins of which he is not aware, and demonstrating contrition toward a force that is rationally absurd.

It is by participating in a rational absurdity that man is made aware of the immanency of God. Grace — the contact between God and man — must be accepted through faith. Whether or not this proof satisfies those who are not willing to extend their faith to that point, it is true that it clarifies the process by which Niebuhr finds meaning in history. The most convincing justification which Niebuhr offers is that the immanency of God (plus man's acknowledgment of this God through repentance) is a profound judgment upon the human situation.

Both the heights and the depths of the world of spirit are known. The knowledge of the depths within the self saves from pride, prevents a bitter criticism of the sins of others and makes a sullen rebellion against the imperfections of nature and history impossible; the knowledge of the heights keeps profound self-knowledge from degenerating into bitter disillusionment.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

The act of repentance, and the acceptance of grace does two things. It makes real the existence of the immanent God, and it makes possible a profound analysis of the self. It is the self which acts in history; it is the immanent-transcendent God which gives meaning to history, and which therefore serves as the basis for a philosophy of history.

This analytic step from man to God is of fundamental importance in Niebuhr's systematic philosophy of history. Until he had explained the meaning of God for history, he was unable to justify his contention of meaning in history. If he were not able to show meaning in history, his philosophy of history would have made no sense. Each philosophy of history may utilize a different crutch by which to give history "meaning." It may be that "reason" shows history moving progressively toward some type of millennium on earth, or that dialectical theology shows that human history is meaningless in its relativity. In each case a meaning is placed on events within history — even if that meaning is the fact that "meaning" cannot be understood by man. For such an interpretation has still confronted the problem of meaning in history, and has organized a philosophy of history based upon its analysis of the problem of history's meaning. Niebuhr, in 1934, had clearly shown that he interpreted the meaning of history by means of the reality of an immanent-transcendent God.

5.

There are, in Reflections on the End of an Era, other chapters valuable for understanding Niebuhr's philosophy of history. The opening chapter,

"The Life and Death of Civilization," is concerned with man's inability to evaluate properly his position in history. Modern man has failed to recognize the relative nature of his "mechanisms."

Mechanism easily veils the actual realities of life. It makes human life seem to be a series of highly rational social relationships and hides the fact that these relations are actually the product, not of mind and conscience but of power and impulse.¹⁵¹

Modern man does not realize that his "will-to-live" is easily "transmuted" into "an imperial will-to-power." Man's will-to-live, his effort to escape mortality, creates the danger of man's attempt to absolutize, by means of power, his own historical position. The result is that human history becomes a tangle of power which is driven by impulse. This is a rational process — it is a mechanism. But the "realities" of human life are that man is unable to absolutize his own historical era, or his position within that era. He is not able to fulfill his own destiny in history. The "mechanistic" assumptions of modern man cast a veil over this reality, for man can only fulfill himself with the aid of a non-rational resource.

The problem with depending upon reason alone within history is that the limitations of that device are not fully realized. Its ability to control "impulse" is overrated by modern man. Reason frequently "provides rationalization rather than restraints for the play of egoistic impulse."¹⁵² Man's impulses cannot be totally controlled by reason, because the self issues forth both reason and impulse. The two are not separate entities but are bonded together by their common origin in the self.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 5.

Reason is prostituted to self-seeking motives because of man's will (impulse)-to-live. A person will "universalize" himself and his own will-to-live through the use of reason, and will direct it against those who would prevent him from working his will.¹⁵³

Reason may, in short, result in two conflicting strategies: the strategy of universalizing a particular form of life by seeking to subject all competing forms of itself, and the strategy of subjecting all particular forms of life to the universal. Driven to its logical conclusion the latter strategy ends in the impulse of all high religion to subordinate every specific form of life to life in its more absolute form to God.¹⁵⁴

The unmitigated force of reason is not, therefore, without disastrous consequences in human history. Since reason must of necessity function within the self, it is subject to the evil tendencies inherent in the self, and occasionally serves as merely a rationalization for man's impulse. The converse of this argument is that since, by observing the facts of history, we detect instances where reason served as a rationalization for impulses, we are justified in assuming that the locus of man's reason (the self) is capable of evil despite the best intentions of "reason." The suggestion of a systematic argument for man's original sin is not elaborated in this book,¹⁵⁵ but its importance for Niebuhr's philosophy of history is evident from the fact that it casts doubt upon the ultimate efficacy of reason, and that Niebuhr's philosophy of history does not utilize reason as a base.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵⁵See Human Nature, chapters 7-9.

Niebuhr's pessimism concerning man's use of reason was not a small matter. He was convinced that the force of human "impulse" in history was of vast importance. There could be no complete mitigation of man's impulse through reason. The tension between the forces of reason and of impulse could not be resolved for they were inherent in the make-up of the self. Within the self, reason was torn apart by egoistic considerations. The result could not but be something far less than an impartial force working in history. Either man would denigrate his own individual rights by over-compensating for his ego, or he would fail to appreciate the egoistic element involved in any decision based upon "reason." The tension could not be resolved.

No stable equilibrium is ever reached in history between the two impulses: the impulse to subject the individual or social ego to the universal even to the point of self-annihilation or absorption and the impulse to universalize the ego even to the point of destroying or enslaving all competing forms of life.¹⁵⁶

It is significant that the first part of this opening chapter in Reflections on the End of an Era, in which Niebuhr analyzes "reason," is the first essay (in his books) in which a strictly logical method of argument is employed. It is a discourse elevated above most of that found in the earlier Moral Man and Immoral Society, and in it one can recognize Niebuhr's concern to make his philosophy more systematic. The first part of this chapter thus sets the tone for that writing in the book which deals with philosophy of history.

¹⁵⁶ Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 9.

A major argument of this volume was that there was a sharp distinction between "spirit" and "nature."¹⁵⁷ By this Niebuhr meant that nature (or reason) could not alone deal with man's problems, and that the "spirit" was necessary. This is true because the spirit is the source of the ethical force in life. The spirit should not be rationalized — brought completely into the realm of nature — because this would dissipate some of its force by allowing man to imagine that he has gained control over this particular factor. Such a realization would eliminate the tension within the self and allow man to pride himself for being in complete control of his destiny.

The results of this, according to Niebuhr, would be disastrous. The failure to understand that reason would be used to justify impulse "was a fatal mistake because it permitted a more unrestrained expression of impulse than ever before in history."¹⁵⁸ Niebuhr concluded with a dynamic (and sometimes misunderstood¹⁵⁹) attack upon man's supreme faith in reason:

The wise men of our era did not realize at all that mind is the servant of impulse before it becomes its master and that the first effect of mind upon impulse is to make man more deadly in his lusts than the brute. Impulses always express themselves in well-defined limits in nature But in man reason bursts the bonds and limits which nature sets upon her own impulses. Man's higher degree of self-consciousness and egocentricity transmutes the brute's will-to-survive into the human will-to-power.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 9, esp. fn.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁵⁹See Holtan P. Odegard, Sin and Science: Reinhold Niebuhr as Political Theologian (Yellow Springs, Ohio), passim.

¹⁶⁰Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 17.

It should be recognized that Niebuhr wrote this in the heart of the Depression, and at a time when he felt that a civilization was reaching its end. Although this serves to explain a part of the disdain he showed toward man's rational faculties, a more important fact is that this element of his thought retained a vital role in his philosophy of history.

6.

The remaining sixteen chapters in Reflections on the End of an Era are of less importance for Niebuhr's philosophy of history, but are worth considering, especially since they underscore some of the points already considered.

Perhaps the most consistent strain in this book is the warning given against a too complete reliance upon reason. Although reason is not identified with nature, Niebuhr charges that the force of reason is often used to rationalize the irrational impulses of man's nature. Because of this, Niebuhr can make the following statement:

Our optimistic rationalists fail to recognize that the collective enterprises of man belong to the order of nature much more than to the order of reason.¹⁶¹

The sin of the self, which consisted of the failure to recognize the imperfect use of reason because of its connection with egoism, is also attributed to, and more dangerous in, collective man. This argument is the same as that presented two years earlier in Moral Man and Immoral Society, except that Niebuhr gave it a more systematic statement in Reflections on the End of an Era. The

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 31.

theme, however, remained the same:

The wise men who see the logic of history so plainly always live under the illusion that the men of power can finally be persuaded to see what they see. They suffer from this illusion because they do not realize how much the collective life of man moves by impulse rather than by reason.¹⁶²

Niebuhr saw no justification for the belief that larger communities would bring "the impulses of nature under an adequate rational and moral scrutiny and . . . avert the deadly vengeance of history upon predatory life."¹⁶³ People who believed this live, he argued,

under the illusion that life, including collective life, can be made fully rational and moral. They have not yet seen with what stubborn inertia life-as-impulse defies the obvious imperatives of life-as-spirit.¹⁶⁴

Those "imperatives" of spirit included a recognition of human sinfulness, which would help to solve the blindness of the faith given to reason, and an acceptance of the immanent God by means of contrition. Other analyses were bound to fail due to a lack of awareness for the heights and depths of the human spirit. It was with this confidence that Niebuhr could write that "all purely moralistic interpretations of history are mistaken."¹⁶⁵ Pure moralism could not account for the failure of reason to solve the problem of history's meaning.

Niebuhr was especially critical of the social sciences, in their attempt to foster a philosophy of history based upon "reality."

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., p. 32.

Sociologists, whose special business it is to study the realities of social life, seem to be particularly obtuse in dealing with the profounder and more tragic aspects of human history.¹⁶⁶

The prejudices of the liberal tradition — optimism, rationalism, and individualism — were made the basis for a philosophy of history which failed "to do justice to the doleful realities of human life."¹⁶⁷ According to Niebuhr, the "real basis for all of the errors of liberalism [including its philosophy of history]
is its erroneous estimate of human nature."¹⁶⁸ By this statement he meant that liberal philosophy of history did not appreciate the egoistic impulses within the self which result in the corruption of "pure reason," and thereby define man's sin.

It was not only in his discussion of the errors of liberalism that Niebuhr offered general statements about the nature of history. He could speak of a "general historical logic" that was not followed due to nationalistic (egoistic) interference.¹⁶⁹ He spoke of history as passing "negative judgment upon predatory life."¹⁷⁰ He was concerned that evil in history could not be destroyed because the instruments by which the forces of good destroy evil cannot help but have transferred to themselves a portion of the evil, thus perpetuating that force in human history.¹⁷¹

The problem of good and evil is prominent in Niebuhr's thought. One reason for this was his feeling that liberal visions of history did not adequately understand the permanence of human evil.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 46-48.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., p. 48

¹⁶⁹Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷¹Ibid., p. 94.

The processes of history are too rough to make a precise discrimination between good and evil possible. A civilization which has outlived its usefulness is destroyed in spite of its virtues. That is what makes the realities of history so outrageous to moralists and why they always insist that future history must be more refined than that of the past.¹⁷²

According to Niebuhr, the liberal-moralistic view could not accept the realities of history which included the failure of good to win complete victory over evil. Neither communism nor capitalism understood the "complexities of history" well enough to justify their "over-simplified abstractions."¹⁷³ This is primarily simply another way of saying that a philosophy of history must appreciate both the heights and depths of the human spirit, and must realize that all men have — and always will have — the capacity for both good and evil. This "adequate view of human nature" and of man's place in history was possible only in a religion which did not bow before reason (or modern society's "mechanism").¹⁷⁴

The co-existence of good and evil in history was a constantly stressed point in this book, and all of those which followed.

The moral logic of history is never pure and dispassionate precisely because judgment upon evil cannot be executed without stiffening the spirit of justice with an alloy of the spirit of vengeance.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁷³Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 113-114.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., p. 139. Cf. Beyond Tragedy, p. 161; and Human Nature, pp. 12-18.

Although the "executors of judgment in history" mix "the hope for a city of God" with their more lustful and egoistic activities, progress "toward the higher good" is made upon "very tortuous routes and . . . the dreams of the ideal are sometimes cruelly disappointed."¹⁷⁶ From this analysis, it is obvious that "history never moves, even to its inevitable goals, on a straight line."¹⁷⁷ Further, it is evident that man is most inhuman when he denies the dictum that good is suffused with evil, and "imagines his natural impulses and his relative values to be the instruments of some absolute good."¹⁷⁸ Man is most cruel when he is unaware of his cruelty, and this is the case when he assumes that he foresees a "straight line" through history, and thus absolutizes his own relative position in history. This "yearning after the absolute" was a "weakness of the human imagination" that, according to Niebuhr, would continue throughout human history.¹⁷⁹ This kind of pessimism was generally tempered, however, with expressions of hope.

When the hard realities of history have once again dissipated the utopian dreams of the present the emphasis of classical religion upon the experience of grace will find its way back again into the moral and religious life of the race.¹⁸⁰

"7.

The above passage amply demonstrates the nature of Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy of history as it had developed in 1934. Theological terminology and

¹⁷⁶Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 140.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p. 148

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 275.

symbolism had replaced the rational schema of "liberal" and "philosophical" interpretations of history. Another significant point is that Niebuhr was as much preoccupied with criticizing other philosophies of history as he was with building one of his own. This trait remained with him even in the most systematic presentations of his own philosophy of history in Human Destiny and Faith and History. It is, therefore, perhaps fair to view Niebuhr's philosophy of history as a product of his struggle against the "errors" of the modern era. The fact that his first systematic treatment of the problem of meaning in history appeared in a book of "reflections on the end of an era" is revealing. Witnessing the "end of an era" dedicated to one philosophy of history, Niebuhr felt impelled to search for a "new" one.

VI

THE MIDDLE 1930'S (PART 2)

In 1935 Reinhold Niebuhr published a book entitled An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.¹⁸¹ Although by 1956 he reported that he was neither able to defend nor interested in defending his position in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,¹⁸² the book is an important work if only for the fact that ethics have been, and continue to be, one of Niebuhr's prime concerns. The subtitle for Moral Man and Immoral Society was "A Study in Ethics and Politics," and this attempt to combine political action with ethical judgment remained for Niebuhr a valid function for religion.

1.

An Interpretation of Christian Ethics does not, however, contribute significantly to Niebuhr's philosophy of history. What it does discuss had already been elaborated in greater detail in Reflections on the End of an Era. An example of this is the comments concerning the transcendency and immanency of God.¹⁸³ He discussed the corruption of the mythical symbols by a single-minded belief in a transcendent God. This was the result of an attempt

¹⁸¹Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York, 1935; Cleveland, 1956).

¹⁸²Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 434-435.

¹⁸³An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 18-20.

to rationalize the symbols.¹⁸⁴ He praised the catastrophic aspect of the Marxian philosophy of history, but criticized its utopianism.¹⁸⁵ Niebuhr spoke of Judeo-Christian religion (prophetic religion), and its ability to maintain the tension between the real and the ideal, with the ideal transcending "every historical fact and reality."¹⁸⁶

Niebuhr did, in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, introduce the "myth of creation" into his philosophy of history:¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 20-21.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 25-26.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹⁸⁷This paper has not emphasized systematically Niebuhr's treatment of "myth." Rudolf Bultmann's work on New Testament "mythology" is better known than that of Niebuhr. However, the latter does not wholly accept Bultmann's interpretation. (For a comparison of Bultmann's and Niebuhr's interpretation of myth see Hans Hoffmann, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 68-88.) This subject is expansive — especially as related to philosophy of history. Of special value is Niebuhr's article, "The Truth in Myths," in The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh (New York, 1937). See also Macintosh's attack upon Niebuhr's interpretation of myth, in which he traces Niebuhr's enchantment with mythology from Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. ("Is Theology Reducible to Mythology?" The Review of Religion, 4 [January, 1940], 140-158.) Niebuhr's reply is in The Review of Religion, 4 (March, 1940), 304-308; and Macintosh's rejoinder was published in May, 1940, pages 434-437. Edward J. Carnell also traces Niebuhr's appreciation of myth to the Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. (The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr [Grand Rapids, 1950], p. 113, note 42.)

The myth of creation offers . . . the firm foundation for a world view which sees the Transcendent involved in, but not identified with, the process of history. It is important to realize that the myth of creation is only the basis of this dialectic and that its further elaboration results in the prophetic or apocalyptic characteristic of this religion, marked by its hope for an ultimate fulfillment of meaning and its faith that the God who is the ground of existence is also the guarantor of its fulfillment.¹⁸⁸

But there are no significant additions in this passage to those thoughts found in Reflections on the End of an Era. It is important, however, that Niebuhr was eager to emphasize the fact that he proposed a "genuinely prophetic religion." Prophetism defines much of his philosophy of history. In a prophetic religion, "redemption is never, as in rational and mystical religion, above the realm of living history, but within and at the end of it."¹⁸⁹ Two years later, in Beyond Tragedy, the problem of redemption within, at the end of, or "beyond" history was to receive systematic discussion.¹⁹⁰ A suggestion of this was given in 1935 when Niebuhr stated that "the eschatology of Jesus, though this-worldly in framework, went beyond the possibilities of natural existence."¹⁹¹

This "clue" to a deepening consideration in Niebuhr's philosophy of history received some further expression in this book. Niebuhr related the "meaninglessness of life" to a "faith in the final unity." The "final unity"

¹⁸⁸An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 29.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹⁰See Beyond Tragedy, chapter 1, esp. p. 22.

¹⁹¹An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 37.

transcended the "world's chaos," yet was "basic to the world's order."¹⁹² This is nothing more than a restatement of the transcendency and immanency of God. But we may read such statements in the light of Niebuhr's interest in eschatology, for the nature of God forms the basis for the interpretation of history's end. The relationships between the dual nature of God on the one hand, and the culmination of history on the other, can be followed in this passage:

Placing the final fulfillment at the end of time and not in the realm above temporality is to remain true to the genius of prophetic religion and to state mythologically what cannot be stated rationally. If stated rationally the world is divided between the temporal and the eternal and only the eternal forms above the flux of temporality have significance.¹⁹³

The case for the immanency of God is here placed in the context of the end of history. This end is not to be "above temporality," but is to be a genuine apocalypse. The importance of an immanent God is powerfully evident now: if history culminates within itself, and God is merely transcendent, then redemption is impossible. Prophetic religion understands this and states the "reality" mythologically, whereas rational interpretations fail to see the connection between the apocalypse and the "rationally absurd" immanent God.

The logic of Niebuhr's argument must be accepted if we are to understand why he places the source of history's meaning beyond history. The immanence of God operates within history, but it is the transcendence of God

¹⁹²Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁹³Ibid., p. 59; cf. p. 123.

which gives history meaning. The first point that must be granted is, as Gordon Harland has written, that to "ask the question of the meaning of history is to ask the question of the 'end' of history."¹⁹⁴ C. C. McCown has reacted sharply to Niebuhr's belief that the meaning of history is transcendent, that it is "beyond history." McCown believes that "the value and meaning of history are to be sought and found within history."¹⁹⁵ However, if we agree that we cannot know the meaning of history until the end of history, we must also accept the corollary that meaning cannot be found within history because that would imply that history has not truly "ended." The force of "common sense" may assure us that McCown is correct, but Niebuhr's logic asks us to look for a meaning which is beyond history's relativities, i.e., for a transcendent meaning.

We should not forget that much of what we call "absurd" and "irrational" is nothing more than Niebuhr's sense of paradox. It is a paradox that a God can be both transcendent and immanent, and that history can both end and be redeemed. A classic example of Niebuhr's use of paradox is the possibility of something which is impossible.

The apocalypse is a mythical expression of the impossible possibility under which all human life stands. The Kingdom of God is always at hand in the sense that impossibilities are really possible, and lead to new actualities in given moments of

¹⁹⁴Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York, 1960), p. 95.

¹⁹⁵C. C. McCown, "In History or Beyond History," The Harvard Theological Review, 38 (July, 1945), 175.

history. Nevertheless every actuality of history reveals itself, after the event, as only an approximation of the ideal; the Kingdom of God is therefore not here. It is in fact always coming but never here.¹⁹⁶

Although this passage appears paradoxical — if not unintelligible — the paradox is one which Niebuhr would accept as true. The important fact here is that Niebuhr has attempted to show that a myth can be true. Historical illusions do not destroy the truth of the myth. For example, the lack of historical truth in the story of the fall of man does not destroy the truth contained in the myth of the fall of man.¹⁹⁷

2.

In a chapter entitled "The Christian Conception of Sin," Niebuhr showed the way in which the myth of the fall is an adequate expression of the nature of man. This is important because Niebuhr's acceptance of man's sin controlled the shape of his philosophy of history.

Niebuhr felt that the myth of the Fall effectively explained the nature of human evil. According to this myth, "evil came into the world through human responsibility."¹⁹⁸ Evil is therefore attributed — in prophetic religion — to man's "evil will," since it was man who introduced evil into the world.¹⁹⁹ It

¹⁹⁶An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 60.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., p. 60; cf. E. L. Allen, Christianity and Society: A Guide to the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (London, n. d.), p. 37.

¹⁹⁸An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 71.

¹⁹⁹Ibid., p. 75.

was not "the limitations of natural man" that resulted in human evil, but rather the free choice of man, which resulted in the initiation of evil. The Fall expressed this because it made man the active agent in the myth — man of his own will caused his fall. Thus, evil is something inherent in the self, rather than the result of man's environment-produced limitations. Man will not purge his life of evil by eliminating those instruments by which he imagines evil to originate — ignorance, slums, weaponry.

The more man attempts to eliminate evil, the more deeply involved he becomes in absolutizing "partial and finite values." Man cannot eliminate evil because it is embedded in his own self. This is why man cannot fulfill his own history, for he is unable to overcome his inability to perfect his life.

The organizing center of life and history must transcend life and history, since everything which appears in time and history is too partial and incomplete to be its center. But man is destined, both by the imperfection of his knowledge and by his desire to overcome his finiteness, to make absolute claims for his partial and finite values. He tries, in short, to make himself God.²⁰⁰

By attempting to overcome his own finiteness and his own evil, man imagines himself capable of becoming God. At the very least, man's striving toward perfection is in the image of God, for it is axiomatic that God is perfect. This attempt by man results in a jealous God.²⁰¹ The myth of the Fall explains the fact of God's jealousy due to "the human rebellion against the divine." This

²⁰⁰Ibid., p. 82.

²⁰¹For an elaboration of the idea of a "jealous God," see Beyond Tragedy, pp. 27-28.

interpretation of the Fall, according to Niebuhr, is "a revelation of a tragic reality of life," and "is attested by every page of human history."²⁰²

Niebuhr has used the myth of the Fall to support his interpretation of human nature and human history. The myth cannot be rationalized into a position in history, for it is a product of supra-history.²⁰³ It is wrong "to reduce its [*i.e.*, mythical religion's] supra-history to actual history." For when this is done

the myth of creation is constructed into an actual history of origins when it is really a description of the quality of existence. The myth of the Fall is made into an account of the origin of evil, when it is really a description of its nature.²⁰⁴

Thus the myth of the Fall is a "true myth" because it accurately describes the human situation.

The reality of this situation is one in which the importance of inevitable human evil — or "original sin" — is emphasized.

The conclusion most abhorrent to the modern mood is that the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good, and that human history is therefore not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of good over evil, of cosmos over chaos, as the story of an ever increasing cosmos, creating ever increasing possibilities of chaos.²⁰⁵

²⁰²An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 83-84.

²⁰³C. C. McCown has failed to realize that the Fall represents an "eternal myth" in Niebuhr's theology, and it can therefore be accepted as "true" at the same time that evolution is granted. It is true, as McCown writes, that Niebuhr has introduced a "surd" into his philosophy of history, but that is not harmful to a philosophy built upon paradox. ("In History or Beyond History," op. cit., 159-160.)

²⁰⁴An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 85-86.

²⁰⁵Ibid., p. 92.

The perfect allusion for this dilemma is one which Niebuhr has used frequently — that of Scylla and Charybdis. The nature of man assures that his destiny cannot be fulfilled by himself. Man, by his energy and wisdom, is able to create much good, but not without accumulating evil; and he is able to build his cosmos, but not without threatening its existence with even greater chaos.

The "nature and destiny of man" are thus inevitably connected. Man's nature — observed through the pages of history, and illustrated through such Biblical myths as the Fall — demonstrates that he is incapable of fulfilling his destiny. He cannot provide his history with meaning. That function must be left to a force which is beyond man and beyond history.

Man recognizes the possibility for the eternal:

Man as a creature of both finitude and the eternal cannot escape his problem simply by disavowing the ultimate.²⁰⁶

Man is a creature of history, yet he is unique:

Man is the only mortal animal who knows that he is mortal, a fact which proves that in some sense he is not mortal. Man is the only creature imbedded in the flux of finitude who knows that this is his fate; which proves that in some sense this is not his fate.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 68.

²⁰⁷Ibid., p. 67.

Niebuhr was willing to let the paradox expressed in the above passage stand as an expression of truth.²⁰⁸ It is from this type of paradox that he developed his philosophy of history.

3.

It is accurate to designate, as does Herbert Muller, paradox to be for Niebuhr the "essence of history."²⁰⁹ The element of paradox in Niebuhr's philosophy of history is found in prominent use in his first book in 1927, Does Civilization Need Religion?. Seven years later Niebuhr began to systematically construct a philosophy of history in several chapters of Reflections on the End of an Era. Both here, and in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics in 1935, paradox was the Pandora's Box from which flew the various arguments of Niebuhr's philosophy of history. The first chapter of Beyond Tragedy was entitled "As Deceivers, Yet True." The paradox contained in this first chapter title is perhaps symbolic of the fact that Beyond Tragedy was Niebuhr's first book devoted primarily to philosophy of history.

²⁰⁸The most virulent attack upon Niebuhr's conception of the "truth" has been made by Holtan P. Odegard, in Sin and Science: Reinhold Niebuhr as Political Theologian (Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1956). The following passage is typical of the tone of Odegard's book: "History has become, in the hands of Niebuhr, a place or state where man can create progress -- and yet where he cannot, because progress is also dependent upon divine intervention. History has become a haunt filled with mystery in which human problems cannot be solved by men." (p. 64) It greatly bothers Odegard that man should live in a mystery-filled "haunt."

²⁰⁹Herbert J. Muller, The Uses of the Past: Profiles of Former Societies (New York, 1952; Mentor Edition), p. 389.

N. P. Jacobson no doubt believed that the following comments could be offered as trenchant criticism of Niebuhr's use of paradox rather than "reason."

The obscurantism of our author Niebuhr might provide a complete study of its own. His love for paradox can be seen at work elevating absurdities to some more worthy level. Human reason suffers in this treatment, and the force of Niebuhr's entire work is weakened. For if human reason at once provides the only means of communicating meaning and on the other hand cannot be trusted, we are left in a blind alley, indeed. Of course, Niebuhr has no intention of destroying the credibility of reason any farther than is necessary to discredit opposing views.²¹⁰

The whole point of Niebuhr's work is that a philosophy of history cannot be based upon reason. It is true that human reason is a valid means of communication, but that is not the same as saying that human reason is the foundation of meaning. One will feel Niebuhr's work weakened by this argument only if one believes that reason, rather than paradox, offers a more profound appraisal of human history.

Paradox was not the only element of his full interpretation of history that received early expression. A careful study of Beyond Tragedy, The Nature and Destiny of Man, and Faith and History, in conjunction with an examination of his earlier publications, reveals the fact that before the publication of these later three works, Niebuhr had — at the least — intimated all of his major ideas on history. Original sin, as it formed the basis for man's inability to independently

²¹⁰N. P. Jacobson, "Niebuhr's Philosophy of History," The Harvard Theological Review, 37 (October, 1944), 260.

provide his history with meaning, was well entrenched in Niebuhr's theology by the early 1930's. The supernatural force in the form of an immanent-transcendent God, which provided human history with its meaning, was already elaborately defined in Reflections on the End of an Era. The actual "meaning" of man's history was certainly not explained as adequately as it was in Human Destiny,²¹¹ but Niebuhr did show great concern to rescue history from meaninglessness — whether it be the "false meaning" of liberalism or the "transcendent meaning" of dialectical theology.

Niebuhr's early writing does not offer a systematic statement of his philosophy of history, but it does contribute to our understanding of Niebuhr's thought an awareness of the development which made possible the writing of the more well-known later books. It is true that one can gain a sense of Niebuhr's philosophy of history by studying Human Destiny or Faith and History. It is also true that one would not be fully aware of Niebuhr's philosophy of history by merely surveying his early writing. The great synthetic works that a man produces after many years spent discovering and refining his own ideas are surely the most accessible avenues to his thought.

However, to know only these masterpieces is somewhat like appreciating an iceberg only for its exposed tip, and forgetting its massive base. A man's thought cannot be profoundly understood if one merely skims off the "finished" ideas and neglects the development which produced them. The tangle of ideas

²¹¹See Human Destiny, pp. 287-321.

from which Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy of history developed illuminates that vision in a way which the finished philosophy taken alone cannot accomplish.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

The first part of this bibliography is a listing, by date of publication, of those works by Reinhold Niebuhr which were consulted in the preparation of this paper. The second part is a selected list of secondary material pertinent to this study.

I

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